



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

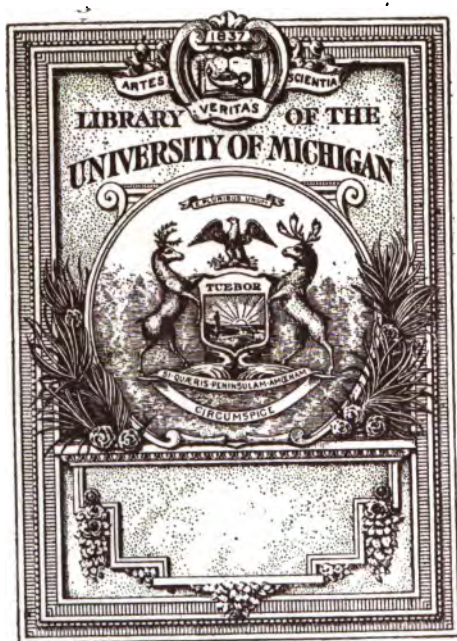
Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>



828
M1234

SERAPHICA

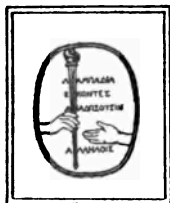
A Romance

BY

JUSTIN HUNTLY MCCARTHY

AUTHOR OF

"IF I WERE KING" "THE PROUD PRINCE"
"THE ILLUSTRIOUS O'HAGAN" "NEEDLES AND PINS"
ETC. ETC.



NEW YORK AND LONDON
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
MCMVIII

101

Copyright, 1907, by HARPER & BROTHERS.

All rights reserved.

Published February, 1908.

01112 175 M1

**IN MEMORY OF
PRUNELLA
THE WELL BELOVED**

341965

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	"A MERRY DEVIL IN PETTICOATS" . . .	1
II.	THE HEART OF THE HUNTER	16
III.	HURRAH FOR THE ROAD	30
IV.	AT THE SIGN OF THE WINDMILL	40
V.	A SEQUENCE OF STRANGERS	50
VI.	THE GENTLEMAN IN GRAY	61
VII.	A PASSAGE AT ARMS	69
VIII.	A MYSTIFICATION	79
IX.	RENAUD IN DISTRESS	90
X.	ENTER THÉOPHILE HARDI	97
XI.	RENAUD FINDS EMPLOYMENT	106
XII.	TRIUMPHANT LAWYER	114
XIII.	A PEEP, AND ITS SEQUEL	130
XIV.	ESCAPE	139
XV.	A HOMING BIRD	147
XVI.	THE LAWYER'S DELAY	151
XVII.	THE PLUCKED PEACOCK	156
XVIII.	A CRY OF PLAYERS	161
XIX.	A GOLDEN AGE	173
XX.	A GARDEN THEATRE	184
XXI.	A MASTER OF GALLANTRY	201
XXII.	"QUEEN COLUMBINE"	208

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
XXIII.	HIS MAJESTY'S WISH	216
XXIV.	COLUMBINE AND KING	222
XXV.	A CHAT WITH MADAME DE PHALARIS .	228
XXVI.	UN FÊTE GALANTE	237
XXVII.	A CATASTROPHE	245
XXVIII.	A KNIGHT CHALLENGER	256
XXIX.	AN APPEAL TO THE KING	261
XXX.	IN THE KING'S NAME	266
XXXI.	RETROGRESSION	278
XXXII.	A LOVER AND HIS LASS	283
XXXIII.	GODS OUT OF A MACHINE	289
XXXIV.	SOME REVELATIONS	296
XXXV.	EPILOGUE	302

SERAPHICA

SERAPHICA

I

"A MERRY DEVIL IN PETTICOATS"

IN the youth of the eighteenth century, when France had for nominal ruler the boy king Louis XV., and for actual master the Regent Philip, Duke of Orleans, the province of Artois was big with a problem. The problem was as old as Eve, and consequently very nearly as old as Adam. Other French folk might have taken such a problem more lightly, more philosophically, more humorously, but the folk of Artois were not as other French folk, and were inclined, at times, to insist not a little upon the distinction. Artois had not always been French. Once she had been Flemish, even as French Flanders had been Flemish. The Flemish threads were still tightly twisted in the fibre of her being. If her people were French subjects by law of sword and law of treaty, they were often Flemings at heart, with all the stubbornness, doggedness, and obstinacy that had made their ancestors so fine a fighting race. This sturdiness of independence was the way of all the Artois people, rich and poor alike, but it was only the rich whose characteristics were taken much

SERAPHICA

into account in those days, and when you said rich you understood noble, the terms being then generally interchangeable in Artois and elsewhere.

Now the land of Artois was divided into the domains of certain great lords, all of whom were supposed to be richly endowed with the stubbornness, doggedness, and obstinacy of their race, and all of whom held their heads so high that they were inclined to treat the court and kingdom of France with a carriage as of equal powers, and to regard the princes of the reigning house as certainly no more than, if indeed as much as, the peers of the puissant nobles of the North. You may find all about this and many other notable matters in Popelin de Secherat's *History of Artois from the Time of the Romans to the Time of the Fifteenth Louis*. What we are concerned with here is the whimsical result of the stubbornness, doggedness, and obstinacy of the heads of two of the great lordships—the duchy of St. Pol and the duchy of Bapaume. One of these heads was a man, the other a woman; that made the business more bitter.

Those great houses, St. Pol and Bapaume, each with its vast domains, its ancient town, its subject villages, its time-honored customs, its honorable traditions, its elaborate social and military organization, seemed, in their pomp and pride and isolation, more like petty kingdoms tolerantly consenting to alliance with France than vassals of the Lily. A net-work of treaties, privileges, arrangements, understandings, unbreakable as the web woven by Vulcan to snare Mars, defended them from encroachments of the sovereign state. Custom and use bulwarked their prickly susceptibilities. Though the two families had been nominally French families for this many a year, still in the well-

SERAPHICA

blended stock the old Flemish liberty of spirit asserted itself persistently, stiffening the grafted French suavity, the grafted French urbanity, the grafted French suppleness, curiously enough. Behind the chivalry that came of French alliances, over-naming the old race, much of the lusty Flemish roughness and toughness, something even of the ruddy Flemish ferocity, lay dormant. The belligerent temper that had humbled the pride of France at the battle of the Golden Spurs still survived after four centuries, and survived in houses that had long been French in name and were largely French in blood. This was the reason why the great lords of Artois, and especially the greatest of them, the lords of St. Pol and of Bapaume, took themselves so very seriously, were so very earnest in their assertions of their rights, and loved to think and act for themselves, as if they were still independent princes whose cohesion with France was due to their own complaisance and in no wise to the compulsion of necessity. Nor was their hardy egotism much disturbed. As the great lords of Artois loved their province too well to leave it willingly, and as their names and presences were little known in Versailles, they easily forgot the passing of time and the change of things in the contentment of their lonely grandeur.

The domestic diplomacy of Artois in the early eighteenth century, diplomacy less delicate than direct, more bluff than labored, had dreamed its delightful dream. Certain excellent gentlemen, ecclesiastical, legal, and military, laying their wigs together, pointed complacently to highly colored maps of the splendid province, on which the continuity of the two ducal territories of St. Pol and Bapaume smiled patently in pink and yellow,

SERAPHICA

These estimables and notables of Artois foregathered for a great purpose, as you shall hear. There was a Prince Renaud of St. Pol, of more than marriageable age (his highness would be eight-and-twenty on his next birthday), and there was a delicious little Duchess of Bapaume, quaintly named Seraphica Valeria, who was but half past nineteen, and who certainly ought to be married if she were, as one of her guardians, the Vidame de Bethune, said she was "a merry devil in petticoats." Now the estimables and notables—men of the Church, men of the Sword, and men of the Robe—to whom the fate of Prince Renaud and Duchess Seraphica seemed a matter for them to weigh in their balances, represented two opposing powers whose union these representatives desired. What could seem better to the scheming brains that nested beneath their periwigs than that Renaud of St. Pol and Seraphica of Bapaume should join hands, exchange hearts, and melt their dukedoms into a single territory under a single personality—man and wife being one?

To the Vidame de Bethune, to the Marquis de Flercy, to Monseigneur the Archbishop of Arras, to lawyer-historian de Secherat, and the other distinguished personages who formed a solemn wardership for an exquisite girl, the proposal seemed to be perfection. Here were two great houses that had always been rival and that had been openly hostile, though the later generations suddenly afforded the chance of dissolving all enmity, cancelling all rivalry, and welding their separate splendors together into a magnificent whole. Never might such a chance occur again. Duke Godefroi of Bapaume was gone—Godefroi the jolly, the hard-drinking, the boister-

APHICA

ous, the qua. bus-Nimrod, mighty drinker, mighty hunter, a gûta of temperament, amative of nature, a man of men. He had never tired of eating, of drinking, of the gratification of any of his many appetites, and now all this jollity was but dust, a monument and a dwindling memory, while Seraphica Valeria wore the coronet under the tutelage of that family council, formally appointed, of which the Vidame de Bethune, the Marquis de Flercy, and Monsieur de Secherat were the principal figures. The other side of the question was represented by Duke Aymon de St. Pol. Duke Aymon of St. Pol was old, with an only child—an only son, Prince Renaud. Aymon de St. Pol had never been friends with Godefroi de Bapaume—all the more reason, it seemed to the schemers, for healing the ancient breach by the union of the only daughter and the only son. It would end a feud; it would knit an Artois maid to an Artois man; it would prevent the possible, the very probable, intrusion of strangers as suitors into the cheerful aloofness of the province; it would, by consolidation, increase the dignity of Artois.

Such were the reflections of the excellent gentlemen who had Seraphica Valeria for ward, reflections that resulted, after a conference with certain of Duke Aymon's friends, and finally with Duke Aymon himself, in their marriage plan. It was an admirable plan, it was an adorable plan, in the eyes of the cautelous fellows in the huge perukes who had conceived it. It seemed an admirable, adorable plan to old Duke Aymon himself. It had only one fault, but that a grave one: the plan would not work. Delicate Artois diplomacy, as represented by the Vidame of Bethune, the Marquis de Flercy, Mon-

SERAPHICA

sieur Popelin de Secherat, and their colleagues, found to its astonishment that their matrimonial enterprise was much more difficult than the delicate diplomatists had any right to expect. It seemed incredible that there could be any hitch in the gestation of a scheme conceived by them, as representatives of the dignity of Bapaume, and approved by Duke Aymon as representative of the dignity of St. Pol. But the unbelievable had to be believed, the intolerable to be endured. Once again, in a word, the wonderful plan would not work.

In the first place, it ran counter to the indifference, not to say disinclination, of the Duchess Seraphica Valeria of Bapaume—an indifference which might be set down to school-girlish contrariety, a disinclination which might be attributed to maidenly modesty, an indifference and disinclination which, it was cheerfully hoped, might, with a little pressure from the perukes, be overcome. But, in the second place, it ran counter to the deliberate determination of his Highness Prince Renaud of St. Pol not to wed the bride intended for him. Bluffly, even roughly, he gave the proposal the cold shoulder—would not entertain the match, would not consider the lady. He declined to hear her praises; he declined even to see her portrait; the features that were unfamiliar to him should, so he was resolved, remain unfamiliar. He had never to his knowledge seen her—save once, years ago, when he was hunting, and met in the greenwood a little girl a-horseback, whom those with him declared to be the daughter of Godefroid de Bapaume. The old feud had kept the two great families as far apart as if they had lived at the poles instead of being Artois neighbors, and even if the feud had flagged, which it never did while

SERAPHICA

Duke Godefroi was alive, young Renaud was much too fond of hunting and study, and much too indifferent to the somewhat solemn social festivities, for his habits to lend opportunities for casual, unintentional encounters between the daughter of the one house and the son of the other.

In this ignorance of his proposed bride's appearance Prince Renaud was most mulishly determined to persevere, and his stubbornness succeeded in baffling sundry resolute efforts to overcome it by side attacks and diplomatic inventions. The party of matrimony, the party of conciliation, made many ingenious attempts to smuggle into the Château de St. Pol likenesses of the lovely lady of Bapaume on dainty fans, on porcelain cups, on ivory as miniatures, on canvas in oils, and on card-board in chalks, but in all these well-intentioned experiments met with disastrous results in the form of tattered toys, shattered china, and damaged pictures; for Prince Renaud, having wind of what was toward, and being resolute against temptation, refused so much as to look at anything having an effigy of woman upon it, lest he should be unawares beguiled into admiration. Indeed, in the first stages of his crusade against the Seraphica scheme, he would snatch at and snap any fan which a guileful waiting-maid might artlessly open before him if it seemed to carry a girl's face upon it, or dissipate his morning's chocolate in ruin upon the floor if the chalice in which it steamed and frothed bore on its smooth sides any presentment which might possibly on inspection prove to be a likeness of the dainty Duchess Seraphica. As for pictures—flagrant, patent pictures—the effort to introduce them into the Prince's presence soon yielded to the intolerable fury they provoked.

SERAPHICA

There was only one person in the world to whom the headstrong Prince Renaud condescended to give any reason for any action, and that person was his father, the Duke of St. Pol. Even to his father he gave but one reason, and insisted that it was as good as a million. He quoted, with caustic emphasis, that unlucky phrase of the Vidame de Bethune about "a merry devil in petticoats," and would declare, in a voice over which scorn and ferocity struggled for supremacy, that he did not propose to marry a virago. And the old Duke would listen gravely, and nod his periwigged head, and say little or nothing. He had been rakish in his day, this gracious ancient, and mutinous against dominion, and it amused him to overeye inherited rebellion. He knew nothing of the little Duchess, he had no great heart for the proposed alliance, but he had his reasons for wishing his turbulent son decently domesticated. They did not prevent him from listening with a quiet smile while Renaud objurgated the unfamiliar bride of whom he would have none. Did not the peccant Seraphica ride astride? Did she not smoke long pipes like a grenadier? Did she not devote to fencing and to pistol-gallery long hours that had been better spent with sampler or harpsichord? In a word, or rather in many words, was she not as unpalatably mannish a piece of woman's flesh as ever wore petticoat and yearned to wear breeches? To all of which Duke Aymon would listen, in a slightly diverted quiet, remembering his own youth and smiling at the monotony of the processes of nature.

It was of no use for any of the diplomatic matrimonial wiseacres, Chancellor or Vidame, or another, to formulate excuses for the lady. Prince Renaud would not lis-

SERAPHICA

ten to them on the rare occasions when they got by chance or address an opportunity of haranguing him. "A merry devil in petticoats," he would cite again, with a sniff, and go over, more angrily than ever, the old business about the riding and the smoking, the fencing and the shooting. When he had talked himself into a passion, and vexed his hearers out of temper, the fountain of his volubility would run dry, and he would walk off in a huff, and bury himself in his private library, and sit down to write a sonnet to the bright eyes of Madame de Phalaris.

For that was his secret; there lay the main-spring of his anti-nuptial doggedness. He was, or thought he was, in love with Madame de Phalaris, the fair, the radiant, the amiable, the famous flower in the parterre of Paris. In this he was neither very original nor very wise. That he had been anticipated by many in his romance might have mattered little—for the lady was older than Renaud, and could scarcely have been expected to wait uncomforted till he came, a staring provincial from Artois—if one, and the most important among the many, had not happened to be a person of no less significance than the Regent Duke of Orleans. For the Duke of Orleans was the ruler of France, its real though not its nominal king, and actually too great a personage for even a prince of St. Pol to offend, provoke, exasperate.

Now this was just what Renaud, in his wild way, had managed to do. When Renaud had paid his first visit to Paris, in the dawn of his majority, the capital was not a very cheerful place for young provincial gentlemen of rank and wealth. The sun-king, Louis XIV., was old and cold, his greatness on the wane; Madame de Maintenon was the gloomy queen of a gloomy court; austerity

SERAPHICA

and formality were the mode for those that wished to be in favor; and pleasure had, as it were, to be wooed and won in secret. Prince Renaud, healthy young countryman, found, in consequence, the great city much overrated and very little to his taste, and returned very cheerfully to Artois and St. Pol, to the joys of the chase, the society of Duke Aymon, to his agreeable studies, and to the cultivation of the Muse. But after awhile news came to Artois that the fourteenth Louis was dead and ignominiously buried, that the widow of Scarron, who was the widow of a king, had flitted from the court she had shadowed to a congenial seclusion, and that the flowers of forgotten frivolities were springing from the ground like snow-drops. A little later the winds carried tidings of the gayety of the Regent's court, the gallantry of the Regent's courtiers, the beauty of the women whom the Regent and his friends delighted to honor. The news kindled in Renaud an eagerness to see this unfamiliar Paris, to bask for a while in a brightness that he had sighed for in vain in those former hours in the fair city.

What Renaud willed Aymon for the most part willed also; for the Duke was an indulgent father. So it was settled, after some debate, that the young gentleman, who was now six-and-twenty, well-sounded, should revisit Paris with plenty of pocket-money, and compensate himself for the disappointments of the earlier pilgrimage. Renaud was, in the beginning, all for persuading his father, to whom he was most filially attached, to accompany him on the expedition of pleasure, but the sturdy old countryside nobleman would have none of the suggestion. He loved Artois better than the rest of France; he loved Arras better than Paris; he preferred very much to remain as

SERAPHICA

he was. He had been once to Paris in his youth with his father, who, like him, loved Artois more than the Isle of France, and had heard the fourteenth Louis say scornfully of that father to one who mentioned his name: "I do not know him; I never see him at my court; I think he does not exist." The word was enough for the pride of a St. Pol, and Versailles knew him no more. But the son, but the young heir, that was a different matter. He need not inherit the grudge against the dead King. Philip of Orleans was a new man with new manners. Aymon's boy might enjoy himself; he should travel to Paris.

To Paris accordingly Renaud travelled with disastrous results; for nothing would needs suit the young gentleman from Artois but that he must incontinently fall over head and ears in love with Madame de Phalaris. This was neither very original nor very wise (for, as we have hinted, the lady was at that time the reigning favorite of the Regent), but it certainly was not very unnatural. Renaud de St. Pol, for all that he was nearly seven-and-twenty years of age, seemed little better in the estimation of the gallants of Versailles than a raw booby from Artois. If he was not exactly as passionate a votary of Diana as Hippolytus in the old Greek story, he was certainly a great deal of a simple-minded country-gentleman of a chaste temperament and a romantic fancy, whose studies saved him from being too rustical, whose rusticity kept him in bodily vigor, who had spent scant time in the sowing of wild-oats, and was little fitted by spirit for distinction in libertinage. The moment he saw Madame de Phalaris he thought he saw a marvel; Don Quixote was not more dazzled by Dulcinea. Madame de Phalaris,

SERAPHICA

for the sake of variety, smiled upon his patent adoration. Renaud's head was turned by the condescension of a goddess, and he chose to air so enthusiastically his devotion for the favorite that people first whispered, and then talked, and then laughed aloud; and after the laughter had grown loud enough to vex the Regent's susceptibilities, a strange adventure befell Renaud de St. Pol.

One night as he was strolling home in the moonlight from a supper-party at a great house where the lovely lady had glittered like the full moon, his heart all hope, his head all poetry, he had suddenly been snapped up by a black-habited swarm of strange and silent men. A cloak muffled him, a handkerchief gagged him, he was rapidly crammed into a waiting carriage and carried at a gallop through night and through day, a prisoner in the hands of an armed and silent escort. When captive and captors reached the frontiers of Artois, Renaud was released with the significant warning that the air of Paris was not considered good for his health, and that he would be well advised to breathe it no more.

All this had made him very angry to little purpose, for Duke Aymon, on hearing the whole story, declined to pick a quarrel with the court of France on account of a foolish young gentleman who had interfered with the love affairs of his elders, and on account of a lady about whom Duke Aymon said some words which may or may not have been justified, but which certainly were forcible in their scriptural directness of epithet. So, though Renaud fumed and fretted, there was no help for it but to abide in Artois sulkily enough, and to write madrigals to Madame de Phalaris which were almost as bad as if they had been done by a professional poet, and to con-

SERAPHICA

sider himself a most ill-used man and most unfortunate lover. It is possible that he might have outgrown his infatuation sensibly enough with the speeding of time—for the infatuation deprived him neither of appetite nor of sleep, nor of recreation in the chase, nor of pleasure in his books—if it had not been for the ill-timed idea of the Bapaume alliance and the tactless activity of the Perukes. His exile from his idol was barely a year old when the plan of the proposed alliance came to his knowledge from the lips of his father, accompanied by the staggering fact that his father approved of the match. Instantly the sleeping doggedness of the Flemish share in his composition awoke; instantly he was convinced that he owed Madame de Phalaris an unalterable fidelity, and that to marry under such conditions of mind and body would be an act of unforgivable treason to the goddess of love, the muse of his poetry, his own honor, and the loveliest woman in the world.

It was idle for the easy-going Vidame de Bethune, principal ambassador between the Perukes and Duke Aymon, to point out to the young man, in the only interview he was able to obtain, that marriage did not necessarily, or indeed ever, mean restriction to a single shrine. Renaud's hot-headed, hot-hearted sentimentalities were on edge, and he jibbed at the swinging halter mulishly. His thoughts were all in Paris; his heart yearned to surrender itself to the tread of Madame de Phalaris's dainty slippers. But he saw that difficulties were closing around him; that a marriage so advantageous to two great houses might well come in time to be little less than inevitable; and the more all the horrid possibilities seemed to hem him in, the more he resolved to break through the nets

SERAPHICA

that were being spread so plainly in his sight. At last he registered in secret a mighty oath that he would not be coerced into matrimony, into faithlessness to his angel; that he would see his divinity again at any peril, and renew his vows of fealty.

It was in this agitated temper that he qualified the young Duchess of Bapaume as a virago, and repeated with bitter emphasis the Vidame's infelicitous saying about the "merry devil in petticoats." It was in this agitated temper that he conceived what he was pleased to call an idea. He would mount and ride to Paris, to that paradise where his divine Phalaris played the pseudo-queen. If any resistance were offered to his free entry into the sweet city, if any obstacle were raised to his meeting with his soul's mistress—why, then he would challenge the Duke of Orleans as man to man and as prince to prince to the arbitrament of arms, and win or lose his lady at the point of the sword!

It was a great idea. His fantastic spirit saw no fault in the enterprise. The age of chivalry had not passed away with the champion of La Mancha. Astonished but admiring Europe would surely applaud the spectacle of the heir to an ancient house pitting himself in arms against the ruler of a sovereign state, with the smiles of a new Helen for the victor's prize. Renaud was on fire with excitement, with delight. Ever accustomed to do as he pleased, ever ready to act upon any passing impulse as if it were a fixed law of the universe, his whimsical scheme had scarcely entered his head when he found himself putting it into execution. He gave it out that he was going to join a hunting-party organized by a neighbor in one of the few forests of a somewhat treeless province,

SERAPHICA

Apparently intent on this pleasure, he rode leisurely out of the castle northward early on a fine morning of late May, gave his little escort the slip easily enough, and soon was pelting southward as fast as his horse could carry him, with Paris on his lips and Phalaris in his heart.

II

THE HEART OF THE HUNTER

THE fugitive had not ridden many miles upon his southward journey before it was known in Bapaume that Prince Renaud of St. Pol had taken the key of the fields from its hook, and was scurrying off to Paris to parade his infatuation for Madame de Phalaris under the august nose of the Regent Orleans. This is how it came to be known. The Marquis de Flercy, on the very morning of Renaud's flight, had come to the Castle of St. Pol to pay his respects to its master, and to advance, as he hoped, the negotiations which were, as he desired, to end in the alliance of Bapaume and St. Pol. He found Duke Aymon, in a mood half mirth, half fury, engaged in reading, for perhaps the fiftieth time, a letter from his son which had been delivered at the castle by the hands of a peasant whom Renaud had met upon the road, and to whom Renaud had intrusted the document. Without a word the Duke handed the letter to de Flercy, and without a word de Flercy read it through. It did not take long to read. In it Renaud informed his father, in language in which respect for parental authority was strangely blended with extravagant affirmations of the necessity to yield to the dictates of true love, that he could not entertain with favor the proposed marriage, and that

SERAPHICA

his duty called him to the side of her to whom he had forever pledged his heart. When he had finished the letter the Marquis raised his eyebrows and asked, with brief simplicity, what the Duke proposed to do. The Duke shrugged his shoulders and answered, with equal simplicity and greater brevity, "Nothing."

Thereupon the Marquis de Flercy returned with all speed to Bapaume to his colleagues of the matrimonial council, and told them the astounding news of the flight of Renaud. Of the intended challenge of course nothing was said, for no one guessed at that enterprise. That eccentric secret was locked close in Renaud's heart, and was not to be let loose until his horse's hoofs had clattered through the streets of Paris. But there was quite enough for the Bapaume party to gape at and to rage at in the fact that the heir of St. Pol had declined their Duchess without thanks, and was speeding to Paris to proclaim his devotion for a lady whose affections happened to be very specially engaged. Madame de Phalaris was the recreant's lodestar. No more of his thoughts were given to Seraphica than were sufficient to indorse the epithet "virago."

Now the Duchess Seraphica did by no means deserve the harsh epithet of "virago" so freely addressed to her by Prince Renaud, nor was her character seriously summed up in that haunting phrase coined by the Vidame de Bethune. Yet it has to be admitted even by the courtly historian of Artois, Popelin de Secherat, to whose pains we are so much indebted, that there was, as it were, a something—trivial, if you please, but still existing—which lent at least some show of humor to the Vidame's epigram, and some show of color to Prince Renaud's invective.

SERAPHICA

tive. But it was not of that something that any one would first think who had the privilege of beholding Seraphica.

To begin with, she was enchantingly pretty; and when ebullient local poets went so far as to call her divine, they were less foolish and less fulsome than ebullient local poets often are when they consider themselves called upon to hymn the praises of the great. Her dark hair curled so daintily by nature's grace that she hated to powder it or allow it to be rolled according to the orders of the mode, and would have liked to go always—as she did go very often—with her exquisite tresses flowing carelessly free. Her mistress of the robes always asserted, and would not be denied—as, indeed, she could not very well be denied—that her highness never looked to better advantage than on waking in the morning, a bedroom favor that is generally held to be denied to straight-haired women. Her complexion was so delicately rose-white and rose-red that it never occurred to any of her tire-women to propose a flout of those pure carnations with any touch of the rouge-stick. Her eyes shone so bright and wide under the wonderful curves of their long lashes that in their private talk many people spoke of her not as the Duchess Seraphica, but as the “Duchess Star-eyes,” and it was by this name that the local poets loved to address her. It was not, indeed, a true story that one of these same local poets recorded, to the effect that a nightingale once had flung his little brown, throbbing body against her face, mistaking her mouth for the loveliest rose that had ever been seen. But it was a pretty story, and sounds the note of a popular enthusiasm which the famous portrait of Seraphica in the third portrait gallery of the Louvre royally justifies.

SERAPHICA

So much for her face. Her figure was slim and graceful—girlish, perhaps even a thought boyish. Her body was finely supple, her limbs were as lithe and active as a wild animal's, her skin as white and clear as a peeled willow wand, and her well-made hands and feet were framed by nature for nobler uses than the waving of fans or the wearing of high-heeled shoes. The poets of an earlier age would no doubt have expatiated, by method of guesswork, on other physical charms known only to the lady herself and to her maidens. The songsters of Artois were more reserved in their rhapsodies; but had they been as indiscreet as they pleased, we are assured, on the authority of the already-mentioned mistress of the robes, that all the graces of the girl's person, of which the outer world knew nothing, were just as wonderful and just as adorable as those on which the outer world might freely gaze when the pretty Duchess took the air or gave audience.

If, then, Seraphica Valeria was such a bundle of bodily perfections, how did it come to be that Prince Renaud could shriek disapproval with any faintest shadow of justification? What was that mysterious something, reluctantly admitted by Popelin de Secherat, which gave its show of humor to the Vidame's phrase, its show of color to the cruel term *virago*—a term seemingly so unsuited to a maid of such dainty composition? When all was said and done, it came to no more than this: that the little Duchess had a will of her own and a wit of her own, and that though she was a girl she did not care only and solely, or even largely, for all the things that good little girls are supposed, by their elders and betters, to like. An only child, her sharp ears had often, in the days of her

SERAPHICA

dawning intelligence, caught whispered regrets that she was not a boy. For Seraphica's mother had died while Seraphica was still a baby, and thereafter nothing could persuade Duke Godefroi to marry again. His love for his wife had been the one event in Duke Godefroi's life that had linked the grossness of his earth with the spiritual qualities of beauty and goodness and purity, and lifted him for a season into something like sympathy with and reverence for those unfamiliar things.

When his wife died Duke Godefroi remained what he had been before his marriage—a worldly, turbulent animal, spurred by hungers and thirsts hard to satiate and slake, led ever to sensual pleasures by appetites ever whetted. But, like some clown that had strayed for a while into fairy-land, he carried with him, on his return to the common day, some dim memory of the brighter light and finer fancies of the enchanted realm, and he followed that light and served those fancies when he refused so resolutely to set any woman in the chair of his dead wife. There were gay ladies in Arras who called the Duke their friend and patron, but Godefroi saw fidelity after his own fashion, and kept it in his own way. Thus there was no heir to Bapaume, but only an heiress, and thus the whispered regret, reaching to a child's quick ears, that Seraphica was not a boy.

Something of the same regret rankled in her own baby bosom, and when she gradually became conscious that the people of Bapaume would have very much preferred to be ruled over by a duke than by a duchess in the days to come, she confided to her father, whom she dearly loved and who loved her dearly, her conviction that they ought between them to do the best they could to rectify

SERAPHICA

the mistake that had unwittingly been made. Simple, jovial Godefroi had a certain simple, jovial sense of humor. He was mightily tickled by the innocent whimsicality of little Seraphica's suggestion, and he heartily agreed with her in her wish that she should learn what she pleased and what she could of the arts of boyhood to compensate her—and him—for the fact (regrettable but unalterable) that she was not a boy.

The little Duchess, gaining so much sympathy and encouragement from the jolly giant of whom she was so fond, pursued her whimsy with such a zest and such a patience that her delighted father, who had at first looked upon the matter as little better than a nursery joke, was pleased to enter into the game with a heady enthusiasm, and to regard what may be called the manliness of Seraphica as the best ambition of his idle life. Thus it was that the little Duchess learned, from the same tender age at which an heir to Bapaume would have begun such manly studies, swordsmanship and skill with the pistol, and the art of riding a horse astride, the which she did in the costume of a lieutenant in her father's company of Artois musketeers.

Now because the trick amused him, and because he grew to like her company vastly, the widowed Duke saw much of his daughter and made much of his daughter, and they played at man and man together in the merriest way. Godefroi would call her Seraphicus and a gallant lad, and clap her on the back as if she had indeed been a man companion; and she in her turn would rally him with the friendly irreverence permissible between jolly son and jolly sire, and they would brag of the great deeds they were to do together in war and in love. Yet, all the

SERAPHICA

while, so tender was the bluff Duke's memory for the gentle lady who was dead that his little daughter's innocence suffered no great shock from this odd and jocund comradeship. If, therefore, as Seraphica waxed in years she waxed in knowledge of the world beyond her years, she owed nothing of such knowledge to the old Duke, but all to her quick eyes, her quick ears, her quick wits, and to the long and lonely hours she passed in the library at Bapaume—the room where her father never kept her company—when the Duke was either too drunk or too busy with unfitting associates to be wishful for his daughter's presence.

It was a mad alliance, and a happy alliance, while it lasted. Much did Seraphica love to play the man, and to wear the weapons, and to sip gingerly at the cup while her sire drained deep, and to swear strange oaths which meant very little to her or indeed to any one (for rollicking Godefroi did himself invent them for her), all as innocent as A B C, like the pretty swearings of the ladies of old Rome, the while indeed he pretended to his slip that they were indeed the liberal garnishings and plenishments of the speech of lusty roisterers, pot-tossers, and true devil-may-cares. By-and-by Seraphica knew better, but not then, and she mouthed her harmless asseverations as sonorously and with as full a satisfaction as ever the Fourth Henri of blessed memory, or any tall trooper his more pregnant and peccable monstrosities. Once, indeed, Seraphica won the high approval of her sire by undertaking to smoke a pipe of his tobacco, and by holding off the inevitable consequences for full minutes five after she had finished it. This was the origin, and only foundation, of that story about her habitual pipe-smoking,

SERAPHICA

over which Prince Renaud chose for his own purposes to make such a fuss.

For the rest, Seraphica could do women's work as well as she could mimic men's work. She played and sang like an angel, or a shepherdess, or a duchess; danced lightly and sprightly; could use her pencil more than passably; was intimate with every painting in the great picture-gallery; and had a knack for play-acting which was not generally held commendable in one of her rank, but which hugely tickled Duke Godefroi when she enlivened his evenings with impersonations from Marivaux and Molière, or improvised brisk interludes of her own with one of her women for its heroine and herself its nimble Pierrot or importunate Leander.

All this grotesque, harmless foolery came to an end with the end of Duke Godefroi's wassailings and wantonings, with the silencing of his noisy laughter, with the final quenching of his mighty thirst. When her sire was dead, when her grief for that strange friend and father was so far quiet that she could keep it to herself, when she nominally ruled Bapaume in her father's stead, she found that there was much to resent in her situation. Those great principalities of Artois were like so many pinchbeck kingdoms, fairly accurate parodies of the real thing, with a like parade, like formalities, like solemnity and pomp. All such show and ceremoniousness had been given greatly the go-by in Duke Godefroi's day, but when Duke Godefroi was no more, stateliness and pomposity reasserted themselves in the bereaved duchy. Its affairs were left—pending the minority of Seraphica, who was not, by the custom of Bapaume, to come of age until she was twenty—in the hands of a certain council

SERAPHICA

of elders, all relatives or notables, of whom the Archbishop of Arras, the Marquis de Flercy, the Vidame de Bethune, and that eminent lawyer and distinguished historian, Monsieur Popelin de Secherat, were the most significant for this chronicle. These good gentlemen, whom Prince Renaud spoke of irreverently as the Perukes, guided the affairs of Bapaume with something of a heavy hand, and it seemed as if the Goddess of Mirth had taken her leave for good of its spacious apartments and echoing corridors. Seraphica, that had been used to have her own way in the society of an easy-going parent, soon heartily tired of the solemn little council that guided her actions by Draconian laws, and would permit no such derelictions of provincial etiquette as had made the old rule so enjoyable to a high-spirited, headstrong girl.

But Seraphica was still more heartily tired of the fact, which faced her at every moment, that she was expected to marry, and to marry, not to please herself, when, if ever, it should please her to marry, but to marry to please a mysterious diplomacy which talked much of family tradition, of balance of estate, and of benefit to the aristocracy of the province. All these were considerations which did not appeal to her in the very least, however important they might appear to the minds of a Flercy, a Bethune, a Seckerat, and the other Perukes. When, therefore, in the first instance, the famous scheme of alliance with the house of St. Pol had been broached to her, she on her side had been quite as unwilling to marry as Prince Renaud proved to be on his side. But it is one thing to be unwilling to marry on general principles, and quite another thing to be regarded as so objectionable a candidate for consortship that the threatened groom takes to

SERAPHICA

breaking cups and saying rude things about his proffered spouse. For, of course, full accounts of the uncivil things said and the uncivil things done by Prince Renaud travelled on the wings of all the Artois winds from St. Pol to Bapaume, and were grumbled over in the confabulations of the Perukes, whispered in the passages and anterooms of the castle, and bruited abroad at every village in the duchy.

All this had one remarkable, perhaps inevitable, consequence. Seraphica had never before felt the slightest interest in distant neighbor Renaud, of whom, indeed, she knew as little as the young gentleman knew of her. The feud that had divided the sires would in any case have divided the children, and the two great estates were each of them spacious enough to do a great deal of turning round in without any fear of a scion of the one line bumping up against a scion of the other. Now, however, she suddenly became aware of a burning interest in Renaud de St. Pol. Albeit she had only seen him once when she was a little girl, she knew that he was reported comely, and portraits of him which had been submitted to her when the marriage mischief was first afoot, and which she had neither rejected nor destroyed, confirmed those reports. Instantly her offended vanity pricked her with thoughts of fantastic revenge. Had she lived some hundreds of years earlier she would have levied her fighting men, ban and arrière-ban, have raided St. Pol, and carried Renaud a prisoner to the dungeons of Bapaume, there to languish till penitence deserved pity. Gravely she regretted the degeneracy of an age that denied her this satisfaction. But while she was casting about for some means to ease her heart of its grudge against a reluctant

SERAPHICA

gentleman there came the news that intensified her indignation. The Marquis de Flercy rode, as we know, to the castle of Bapaume with news of the flight of Renaud, and the reasons for that flight as set forth in the letter to Duke Aymon. Of course the news came to Seraphica instantly (indeed, the Perukes saw no reason to keep it from her), and, of course, the tidings greatly increased the heat of her irritation against Renaud and her vehement desire for satisfaction for her slighted personality.

The Perukes said that there was nothing to be done, and began at once to busy themselves in casting about for another possible husband for the lady of Bapaume. But the lady of Bapaume felt that there was much to be done and that she was the one to do it. Her first thought of attack in arms upon St. Pol, already dismissed, was not to be reconsidered. Her council was far too commonplace and formal for any such splendid adventure.

Then there came to Seraphica one of those second thoughts which are often, if not always, best. She would pursue the runagate, swoop into his sphere, capture his heart with a counterfeit, playing at being quite another than herself, and when she had overthrown his stubbornness and routed her rival she would laugh in his silly face. It was as mad a scheme as ever a mad maid hatched, but it did not seem a bad scheme to the little Duchess as she overeyed her exquisite image in the mirror.

To begin with, it would mean a season of freedom. She was as weary of Bapaume as a captured linnet of its cage; she longed to escape from the conclave of Perukes, whose gravity and formality contrasted so tragically with the jollity and freedom she had enjoyed in the days of her lost friend and father. She was Duke Godefroi's daughter

SERAPHICA

every inch, and resented interference as hotly as Godefroi would have done if any one had ever attempted to interfere with him. She saw none of the difficulties, none of the dangers in the way of the adventure; she only saw that she wanted to punish Prince Renaud for his impertinence and that she wanted to run away from Bapaume, and she caught at the opportunity of killing these two birds with the one stone. She feared nothing, doubted nothing: she did not doubt that she could escape from Bapaume; she did not doubt that she could conquer the heart of Prince Renaud if once she came to close quarters with him; she did not fear, as she faced her likeness in her looking-glass, the belauded charms of Madame de Phalaris.

Madame de Phalaris was Madame de Phalaris, very true; but that Olympian loveliness might pass for a trifle fly-blown in comparison with the virgin white and red of the Duchess's young flesh—the Regent's favorite was drifting towards the dusk, while Bapaume's lady was rising from the dawn of divinity. At least she would be no worse off, she reflected, for making the experiment. If she lost, she did but confirm a disagreeable doubt. If she won, her pride was reinstated on its threatened throne and a foolish lover-errant was properly punished. In a jump she was eager to do and dare. Her bright blood was afire with the thought of giving the solemn little family council the slip, and riding away in search of adventure on the wide white highways that lead pilgrims of pleasure to Paris.

Of course there was only one way of undertaking the enterprise. She must masquerade as a gallant cavalier. This essential was no dilemma, solely a delight, a necessity that gave pungency to the exploit, reminding her of her

SERAPHICA

childish protest against the destiny that had made her a girl, and of the way in which her plans to baffle nature had been abetted by her father. She was her father's daughter and would act for herself, on her own judgment, towards her own ends. She would do what she had resolved to do, and also she would do it without any loss of time.

Seraphica was never one to waste much time in reflection which might, as she conceived, be better employed in action. Unruffled by, and indeed unconscious of, the difficulties that must bristle about the path of her adventure, she formed her plan promptly and executed it boldly. Thus it came about that on the morning after the news had reached Bapaume of the flight of Prince Renaud, certain of the excellent gentlemen who acted as the Duchess's guardians were horrified by the tidings conveyed to them by an amazed mistress of the robes that the Duchess Seraphica had vanished into space. She had retired to rest early on the previous evening under pretence of a headache, and in the morning her rooms were empty of her presence. As the garments which the Duchess had worn on the previous evening remained in her bedchamber even as she had taken them off, it seemed at first to the horrified Perukes as if the lively Seraphica had chosen to disappear after the fashion of a new Eve. Luckily, however, a lady-in-waiting speedily relieved their minds by the discovery that a complete equipment of male attire, which the Duchess had procured some time before for the purposes of her private theatricals, had vanished with her. At the same time it was also discovered that a very strong and fleet horse had disappeared from the stables—not the Duchess's usual mount, but an animal especially distinguishable by an expert for its points and power of endur-

SERAPHICA

ance. It was plain that the Duchess had taken French leave; the questions to answer were: "Where?" and "Why?"

It was here that Monsieur Popelin de Secherat, erudite lawyer, amiable historian, and in both those capacities naturally to be credited with an infinite knowledge of the vagaries of human heart and brain, rose, as he believed, to the height of the situation. It was he and the Marquis de Flercy who were first informed of the catastrophe; it was he who first conceived the proper course of action. He swore the Marquis de Flercy to secrecy; he swore the mistress of the robes to secrecy; he swore everybody to whom he deemed it prudent to administer an oath to secrecy. He obtained, without the slightest difficulty, the willing consent of the Marquis de Flercy, an easy-going gentleman, to his proposal that the matter should be left entirely in the hands of himself, Popelin de Secherat. So much being agreed upon, de Secherat's first care was to pay a visit to the Vidame de Bethune, who had just returned from a few days' hunting and who knew nothing of what had happened.

By this time the adventurous Duchess, apparelled in all points like a man and making the most adorable cavalier imaginable, was already many leagues away upon her astonishing enterprise.

III

HURRAH FOR THE ROAD

THE little Duchess had planned her escape very carefully and carried it out very deliberately. While Bapaume was abed she slipped her pretty limbs into breeches, muffled her woman's body in a manly coat, picked her way cat-foot through dark passages and down silent staircases to the stables, where with her own hands she saddled and bridled the horse of her choice. She let herself out of the castle by a side door into the park, of which she had secured the key, and in a few moments was galloping over the soft turf and crying "liberty" as she rode.

What Seraphica wanted was, if possible, to catch up with Prince Renaud ere he reached Paris. Why she precisely wanted this she could not say, but she knew that she did want it, and that knowledge was enough for her purpose. It was very likely that she would be able to gratify her wish for all that Prince Renaud had so many hours' start of his pursuer. For Seraphica was confident that Renaud would, in spite of his love-sickness, break his journey somewhere at night, and while he was sleeping at his ease and dreaming of his Phalaris, Seraphica would be riding through the night and diminishing with every hour the distance that lay between the hunter and the

SERAPHICA

hunted. Seraphica would just as soon ride by night as by day; she knew every inch of the road, not only to the frontier of the province, but a good way beyond it, and she had made for herself a rough map of the highway to Paris, with the names of the principal inns on the journey duly marked thereon.

Those who are familiar with the map of France in the early eighteenth century, before so many boundary-lines were altered, and so many estates obliterated by the effacing fingers of strange captains and still stranger wars, will not need to be reminded that the duchy of Bapaume, by its geographical position, lies decidedly nearer to the great city of Paris than does the rival estate of St. Pol. Though, therefore, Prince Renaud had so ~~many~~ hours' start of the Duchess, so far as time was concerned, in the race to Paris, she may be said to have more than made up for it by the fact that she not only rode while he slept, but that she had to cover a less space of ground to arrive at the given point.

Thus it came to pass that on the white highway leading to the capital two persons were riding at the same time within a little distance of each other, both bound for the same destination, but both holding very different purposes in their hearts. One was the unconsciously pursued, one was the deliberate pursuer; and while the heart of the quarry beat high with romantic hopes and chivalrous intentions, jiggling to love-tunes and the clinking of swords, the heart of the hunter was on fire with wild desires of revenge and punishment and triumphant derision.

It must, however, be admitted that for the first stages of her journey Seraphica thought less of her self-appointed

SERAPHICA

mission of vengeance than of her immediate exhilaration in her spacious liberty. As she rode merrily forward, under the benediction of the moonlit sky, she found herself exalted by a sense of happiness till then unfamiliar. The great white highway that widened before her stride seemed in very fact the pathway to Paradise, to the Lubberland of Do-as-you-please, to the country of Cocaigue, with all its enticements and allurements. Now for the first time she was a man and a free man, astride a man's horse, with a man's sword tapping her thigh and a man's pistol housed in her holsters. The sweetness of the clear air made her heart ache with a strange rapture. "How could people ever lie abed," she asked herself, disdainfully, "while there were such wonders to experience in the liberties of the night?" The distant woods that were drenched with darkness; the spreading meadows that looked spectral in their parament of silver, so many sleeping beauties waiting for the kiss of their lover, the Sun; the flying hedges that defined the reeling earth; the flying cloud-rack that defined the wheeling sky—all these were so many ingredients of enchantment that blended together to make the magic of her gallop entrancing to the girl.

Beneath her the honest horse bounded forward over the checkered road as if he, too, found enjoyment in the unfamiliar pilgrimage. It was like playing some great game of chess, Seraphica fancied, to ride so through spaces of blackness, through spaces of white, the whole countryside for the board, and she herself, at once queen and knight, spurring, unlicensed, towards her triumph. She sang to herself, in her pleasure, choruses of jolly old drinking-songs that Duke Godefroi had taught her; she whistled stirring military tunes; she laughed for sheer

SERAPHICA

exultation at swift movement through the benign silence of the night, at the trees, the fields, the hedges that seemed to flow away from her—fantastic shadows, scurrying spies, scampering madly back to Bapaume with their latest news of the runagate. Let them say what they would; she mocked at their treason. She was free!

By-and-by she slackened her gallop to a canter, not that her manhood flagged, but the best horse in the world cannot gallop forever, and her start was good enough to allow for the luxury of a little leisure. Her spirits were still at the top of mirth's music, but as the night waned and the moon paled the melody of her merriment almost imperceptibly shifted into a minor key, and she found herself, not a little to her surprise, puzzling over love-thoughts. She was not, as she believed, of a sentimental disposition; her whimsical upbringing had opened for her the door of many mysteries that are supposed to be sternly shut against the demure eyes of young ladies of blood; theoretically there was little to teach her. Her queer equipment of knowledge had not made her un-riperly cynical, but neither, on the other hand, had it made her, she thanked her stars, poetical. Life was a goodly game for a man to play at—full of deep-breathed, full-blooded exercise, gallant ambitions, with the best of everything in love and war to win as prizes. Fortune dangled her favors on short strings, bobbing them against the clutching, adventurous fingers, here a crown and there a pretty girl, and there a sword, or a star, or a money-bag. The world went very well for men, but for women it moved at a petty measure. Being a woman and wishing herself a man, Seraphica did not vex herself by fretting at destiny, but set herself to amend the error with no

SERAPHICA

small success. She looked or tried to look on life with a man's eyes; she assured herself that a man's heart beat in her woman's body. But for all her courage and all her cunning, the last word of her argument with nature left her feminine to the elemental question, left her a woman to be wooed, a woman to be won, a woman to be wedded; and this was the sharpest iron of her sex-penalty.

In all the love-tales she had ever read man seemed to have the best of the adventure. This was resentable, and she did resent it. She had felt no touch of the love-fever; the healthy rigors of her existence had schooled her rather in the service of Diana than of Venus; the gentlemen of her father's court, the young Artois gentlemen to be met in Arras and elsewhere, none of these had troubled her cool pulses. Of course she knew that her own case was harder than many. A woman must wait to be wooed. Love she never so briskly, she is supposed to keep her fire to herself, though it gnaw her vitals as the stolen fox gnawed the Spartan, unless it please the man to love too, and being free to speak his mind and her dumbness.

To a duchess of Bapaume even the poor sport of being wooed was, as it seemed, forbidden. Her person had its price in the market, below which it must not fall; her body was to be bartered against the right number of quarterings, the right extent of territory, the right tale of possessions. This detestable neighbor of hers, this unmannerly rascal of St. Pol, had been her appointed lord. Had he been willing she would have been handed over to him by her guardians, with no touch of romance to color the sordid business; at least that was what her guardians intended, though they would have found that Seraphica had a word to say in the matter as became her

SERAPHICA

father's daughter. But he had not been willing, and though, therefore, his unwillingness had delivered her from a dilemma, she had only been saved from one form of insult by another. To what seemed to her as the humiliation of being offered was now added the humiliation of being rejected. Well, to that humiliation at least her high spirits were finding her an answer. She was now playing the active part in a comedy of love: a man was to be pursued and wooed, a woman to pursue and win, for it must be unhesitatingly recognized that the little Duchess had not the slightest doubt of her power to bring the fugitive to her feet, and to keep him there in the most suppliant position until she chose to spurn him and upset him and leave him sprawling and ridiculous.

All these thoughts, conceived in the quiet of the night, and gently stimulated by the easy pace at which she now rode, had insensibly led Seraphica from considerations of the problem of marriage as presented to a young duchess of Bapaume, to considerations of the problem of love as presented to a runaway girl in boy's clothes, who was cantering her nag across Artois, and breathing the perfume of the fields when she was supposed to be asleep between lavender-scented sheets. Would it be possible, she asked herself, for her ever to fall in love, in the sense in which that phrase seemed to be understood by writers of romances, rakes, and ladies'-maids? Many men were merry fellows enough, pleasant fellows enough—such, for example, was her father, of whom she had been dearly fond, and whose jolly memory she kept green with much affection. But if one came to her that was the image of Duke Godefroi in his youth, and if such a one had words of

SERAPHICA

love for her on his lips and looks of love for her in his eyes, she would not, she felt very sure, greet him with any great show of kindness. And the other men she had known, infinitely less likely, were also infinitely less lovable so far as she was able to interpret that word. Set aside Monsieur Popelin de Secherat, Radamanthus of Arras; set aside the Marquis de Flercy, gracious, faded ancient; set aside the Vidame de Bethune, jovial old soldier and toper; weigh in the balance only such of the Artesian chivalry as were at all familiar to her, and wonder how any such could make a maiden sigh and suffer and surrender.

Through the mist of her memories, as she thus speculated, shone for a moment the face, the form of a youth, habited like a hunter, who rode with his company in the greenwood. The youth had a gallant carriage; the youth had a comely face; he made a brave show, with his brave clothes and his brave air, to the eyes of the little girl who stared as he rode by. The memory had not been strong enough to tempt her to strike her colors when the alliance between Bapaume and St. Pol was a-brewing. It was strong enough now to make her feel a fierce satisfaction in the thought that the hunter of that faded yesterday was the hunted of this fresh to-day. For this fellow had flouted her, preferring the full-fledged charms of a Phalaris to the green graces of the lady of Bapaume.

While Seraphica thus rode and mused the minutes flowed into hours, the pale moonlight insensibly melted into the pallor of the dawn, the world grew chill and shivered with the will to wake. The blue-blackness of the nightly curtain was drawn apart, and on the fair field of the revealed heavens the up-coming of the sun flung fierce

SERAPHICA

patches of strong color, making the east, to Seraphica, seem like the gaudy achievement of a herald. Instantly she recalled, with a sudden and resentable wistfulness, the great piece of carving over the hearth in the high hall of Bapaume, which recorded in a miracle of painting and gilding the bearings of the lords and ladies who had brought the blood and the fame and the wealth of France and Flanders to enlarge the glory of her house. What, she asked herself, would all those ancient and honorable shadows have thought of her, the last of her race, riding like a roadster or a gypsy at all adventure along the path to Paris? For an instant she winced, in a swift and unwilling consciousness of the dangers of her escapade. But at that moment a red shoulder of the sun showed itself above the horizon, and at the sight, with the certainty of the new day, Seraphica's spirits soared again. Greeting the risen sun with a cheer, she set her horse to a fresh gallop as she made for a visible goal, for a definite halting-place. In the near distance she saw before her, rising from the plain and begirdled by gardens and orchards, the belfry and the red roofs of a little village. Already from some of the chimneys faint veils of smoke were rising, the pale-gray smoke of wood, the blue-gray smoke of peat, and spreading themselves in a transparent web across the pearl and opal of the growing day.

A few minutes later Seraphica clattered over the cobbles of a village street, her horse showing some signs and its rider no signs of a sleepless, strenuous night, and came to a halt before the village's principal inn, best inn, most popular inn. It was also the cleanest inn and the dirtiest, the sweetest inn and the foulest, the oldest inn and the newest: least popular, worst, and least important—in

SERAPHICA

a word, it was the only inn in the place. It was already alive and alert, its doors agape, its kitchen fire crackling, its windows unshuttered. Chanticleer blew his clarion in the back yard; a cat slumbered on a bench; the inn's knave, that was plainly a jack-of-all-trades—groom, varlet, turnspit, cellarer—leaned against a jam of the door and whistled at his ease, regarding as he did so, with eyes of satisfaction, a silver coin that he dandled in the palm of his hand. He was not, however, so devoted to the contemplation of a gift of drink-money more generous than general to be indifferent to the sound of a horse's hoofs stirring the morning's quiet. He looked up as Seraphica came down the street, pocketed his coin, and was at her horse's head, attentive enough, when she drew bridle at the door.

Seraphica's first question was easily and immediately answered. A gentleman had passed the night there—a gentleman who rode from the north. He was not now in the inn. He had ridden south some half an hour or more ago, having given orders to be called betimes, as one that was impatient to continue his journey. Seraphica gave a little frown at this piece of information but said nothing, while the inn-boy rambled off into praises of the departed gentleman's largesse, fingering, as he spoke, the wealth in his pocket. Seraphica was rapidly considering what it was best for her to do. She was well on the heels of her runaway; nothing was to be gained by actually catching up with him just yet. If she did not feel tired after her night's ride, she knew that her horse was weary, and Seraphica was always considerate to animals. She would break her fast; she would find a fresh mount; she would consider—what she had not yet considered with any care

SERAPHICA

—how she would deal with her fugitive when she encountered him. These points resolved, and the inn-boy's quick interest kindled, and his lively alliance secured by the assurance of drink-money even more liberal than that of the departed hero, Seraphica dismounted, little the worse for a night that, if it had been sleepless, had certainly not been dreamless. She had made the first stage in her adventure.

IV

AT THE SIGN OF THE WINDMILL

A LITTLE way outside the barriers to the north of Paris stood the tavern of the Windmill. It had not merely a windmill for a sign, it had a windmill of its own—a real windmill, whose vans had once creaked and wheeled before the breezes, though they now stood silent, and yet were more profitable in their quiet than they had ever been in their speed. The windmill stood in the gardens of the cabaret, and as it had been the cause of the cabaret coming into being, it had been suffered to stand, and so standing became in time as potent a factor in the latter-day prosperity of the tavern as it had been in the bringing of the tavern into being. The windmill was old—honorably and remarkably old. Had it continued to ply its trade it would have shaken itself to pieces long ago, but its indolence preserved it, green in age.

Wellnigh a century and a half earlier it had stood on its present site, then not in its youth, and busy on its business of grinding grist into fine white flour. It stood among fields in those days, quite a countryside windmill, with the miller's house hard by and the miller's garden roundabout, when one summer's day a mignon of the court of the Third Henri came riding by and spied the miller sitting at a table in his garden, drinking wine at his ease

SERAPHICA

among flowers. An instantly suggested consciousness of dryness of gullet and emptiness of stomach reminded the courtier with force that man, whether mignon or miller, is doomed to thirst and hunger. Monsieur de Maugiron thereupon accosted the miller, pleading the parching of thirst, and throwing himself frankly upon the miller's hospitality. The miller was a friendly fellow, and in a few seconds homespun and velvet hobnobbed across a wooden table, pledging each other in a vintage that had mellowed to an age that glowed with mirth and kindness. The courtier praised the wine; the miller would take no other payment than his praise; Monsieur de Maugiron had to give way and remain the miller's debtor. But the mignon was so pleased with his entertainment and his entertainer, with the good wine and the grateful shade of the ancient mill, and the brisk air that fanned that garden of sweet plants and wholesome herbs, that he came again, bringing Quelus and Schomberg with him; after which visit he made an agreement with the miller that he should entertain Maugiron and his friends, from time to time, with meat and drink in his garden, and accept payment for his pains. The merry mignons spread the praises of their rustic paradise at court, and in a little while it became fashionable for lords and ladies to make parties of pleasure to the windmill, and eat and drink and make love in its joyous garden.

Long after Quelus, Schomberg, and Maugiron had come to their tragic and united deaths in the Parc des Tournelles, the popularity of the windmill as a place for casual cheer persisted. At length the miller, in view of the increasing favor, became less and less a miller and more and more a taverner; and in the next generation

SERAPHICA

his son was solely taverner, and the vans of the mill whirled before the wind no more. But the visitors liked the mill, and so the mill remained, and was carefully patched and mended through the years; and while the tavern of the Windmill grew in repute, the mill under whose protection it had sprung into being stood at ease in the garden, an honored monument. It had seen the Fourth Henri buy Paris with a mass; it had seen the musketeers of M. de Treville and the musketeers of his Eminence brawling in its shade; it had placidly outlasted the dawn, the glory, and the troubled dusk of the Sun-King. Now it contemplated, unchanged, the amazing rule of Monseigneur the Duke of Orleans, Regent of France. It was no longer so much the fashion as of yore to feast at the Sign of the Windmill. Paris had grown, modes had changed; there were many places of pleasure within easier reach of a pleasure-loving hour. The tide of taste had ebbed away from the Windmill inn; gallants gallanted, epicures feasted, swashbucklers brawled elsewhere in more modish environment. In a sense, the Windmill had had its day, like Karnak, or the Parthenon, or the Colosseum, and other once famous places of public resort.

Save on feast-days and holidays, therefore, the tavern of the Windmill differed in nowise from any other inn beyond the barriers, and drew its daily custom from those that travelled, this way or that way, on the northern road, and even of these there were not many to pause at the Windmill, which stood too near Paris for those who were either going or coming. The landlord, Master Adam Billaut, neither fretted at lean days nor was puffed up by fat days. His predecessors in name and place had

SERAPHICA

made themselves rich under the shadow of the windmill, and, as became thrifty people, had put by, each Billaut in his reign and generation. Consequently the present Adam Billaut was well-to-do, even wealthy, and it would have troubled his pocket not at all if he had chosen to close the inn shutters and retire upon his means.

But the one part which Providence has designed Master Adam Billaut to play in the mask of humanity was the part of a contemplative, plethoric innkeeper, and the one part in that mask which Master Adam wished to play, or could have conceived himself as playing, was the part of a contemplative, plethoric innkeeper. So the inn of the Windmill remained open, and remained the best hostelry for man and beast to be found in the whole of France, or, for that matter, in the whole of Christendom. Master Adam said so, and Master Adam ought to know; and if his high opinion of his old homestead was not always shared by those who sat for an hour at its board or sipped a cup of its vintages, that had to be set down to their bad taste and lack of appreciation rather than to any possible blemish in the board or the cellar of the Windmill inn.

On a certain pleasant spring morning the Windmill inn was destined to play its significant part in the history of France. Quite unprescient of this dignity, Master Adam still lay slug abed, drowsily dreaming pleasant dreams, in which he was, as in reality, the well-to-do innkeeper of a well-kept inn. Quite unprescient of this dignity, Gillette, the maid of the inn, rose betimes to attend to her duties. This Gillette was a dainty young woman, whose presence as maid added notably to the value of the hostelry in the eyes of passing patrons. She was really the niece

SERAPHICA

of Master Adam, and therefore no more than his niece—and, indeed, Master Adam did not include the charms of the fair among the diversions of a contemplative, plethoric innkeeper. Gillette, vivacious, provocative, petulant, as young as the spring weather, and as pretty, flitted hither and thither in the cool, dark, main chamber of the Wind-mill inn, preparing for the ever possible if not always probable traveller to or from Paris. She tripped from the sideboard, where mugs and jugs and plates of pewter gleamed, to the linen-closet, where treasures of napery lay concealed; she looked through the little window onto the north road, to see, like sister Anne, if any one was coming; she flicked with a duster here and there at imaginary specks of dust. While she bustled she was singing softly to herself in the blitheness of her spirits, and the song she sang was a quaint old French folk-song in a minor key:

*“Derrière, chez mon père,
Vole, vole, mon cœur vole;
Derrière, chez mon père,
Il y a un pommier doux.”*

The song went on to tell the tale of three princesses who sat in the shade of the sweet apple-tree. But Gillette did not get very far just then in the chant of their fortunes, for the little window that looked out onto the dusty north road was softly opened by stealthy fingers, and a head intruded—a head with an honest, jocund face under a military cocked hat, and a liberal gift of mouth that was now concentrated upon the effort to attract Gillette by a discreetly alluring whistle. As a whistle the ex-

SERAPHICA

periment was not exactly musical, but it gained its end, which was all that any whistle has a right to hope for. Gillette swung round with a whisk of her short skirts and greeted the visitor with a little cry of delight, which might well have stirred the blood of any gallant who heard it. Thus encouraged, the visitor urged still farther into the room a pair of sturdy shoulders clad in the cheerful uniform of a barrier guard, and inquired; with a cautious whisper:

"Where is Papa Adam?"

Gillette answered, with a shrug of her shoulders:

"Where he always is at this hour — asleep in his room."

The barrier guard rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, "my business is with him, but I don't think I'll disturb him just now. You will do as well. May I come in?"

"Of course you may, Porte-Panache," the girl answered, demurely. "The Windmill inn is free to all who carry themselves soberly and decorously."

"That I always do," Porte-Panache asserted, and, withdrawing himself from the window, he entered the inn by the door, which framed as he did so as stalwart a specimen of a barrier guard as any ruler of France could desire to have in his service. Gillette had turned away, perhaps intentionally, as he entered, allowing the young soldier to take her unawares and twirl her round to him and his eager embrace. Gillette submitted to his salute with the assumption of being taken by surprise; then she gently repulsed him.

"Behave yourself," she protested. "We must kiss no more till we marry."

SERAPHICA

"Let us marry to-morrow," Porte-Panache suggested, gallantly. The girl made a little face.

"To-morrow comes never," she said, with a wistful irony. "We haven't a sou, you and I."

"Papa Adam is rich," Porte - Panache murmured, thoughtfully, more to himself than to the girl; but the girl heard him.

"Papa Adam is rich," she agreed, "and Papa Adam may remember me in his will; but Papa Adam means to live as long as he possibly can, and Papa Adam would never forgive me if I married while he needed my help at the Windmill."

"I could quit the barrier guards," Porte-Panache suggested, plausibly. "I could take all the cares of the Windmill off his hands."

"I have no doubt you could," Gillette answered, tartly, scrutinizing her lover with appreciating, not unapproving eyes—"I have no doubt you could; but Papa Adam would not relish the suggestion, so we need not waste breath over it." She saw with sympathy her lover's disconsolate face, and laid a caressing hand on his shoulder. "Cheer up! We soon shall have money; for I have made up my mind to be an actress."

At the enunciation of this momentous decision Porte-Panache almost reeled, and he stared at Gillette as if she had suddenly gone crazy.

"An actress!" he gasped, with as much astonishment in his voice as if Gillette had announced her intention of becoming Commander-in-Chief or Lord High Admiral. But Gillette nodded her pretty head reassuringly.

"Just so," she affirmed—"an actress. Why, 'tis as easy as skipping, and only needs good looks and good nature."

SERAPHICA

Porte-Panache looked dubious.

"I don't understand how you are going to manage it—" he began. But Gillette promptly cut him short.

"Never you fret about that," she declared. "Trust me to manage. I have written to Master Hardi."

"Have you?" grunted Porte-Panache, who seemed to be decidedly displeased. "And who may Master Hardi happen to be?"

Gillette held up her pretty hands, that the work at the Windmill had never roughened, in affected astonishment at the young guard's ignorance.

"Who is Master Hardi?" she cried. "Why, you will be asking next who is Abbé Dubois, or some such non-sensical question."

"No, I shall not," Porte-Panache retorted, "for I know very well who the Abbé Dubois is. Who does not? But I do not know who Master Hardi is, and I shall be obliged if you will inform me."

Gillette smiled slyly at the manifest irritation of her lover, but, though she was tempted to tease him further, she was also too eager to divulge her news to gratify this inclination.

"Master Hardi," she said, solemnly, "is the head of a company of players, and he is also fortunate in the favor of the Regent. He passed this way last week on his way to Compiègne. I sent him a note through his servant, asking him to see me on his way back. If he likes my face—"

"Well, what will happen if he likes your face?" Porte-Panache questioned, somewhat sulkily.

Gillette answered, blithely: "Why, then our fortunes are made. I shall make heaps and heaps of money, and

SERAPHICA

then we shall be able to afford to get married, which we shall never do if we have only your pay to count upon. Now, do not look peevish; there is a dear. It is the best thing to do for both our sakes."

Porte-Panache scratched his head.

"Perhaps it is, Gillette, if you say so, though I cannot say that the plan pleases me. Well, I must be going."

He gave the willing girl another kiss, and turned towards the door, when he suddenly seemed to remember something and returned to Gillette.

"I had forgotten this," he said, and pulled from his breast-pocket a folded paper which he slowly unfolded and presented to Gillette for her inspection. Gillette, taking it, saw that it was a printed document issued by the chief of police in Paris, giving an elaborate description of the personal appearance of Prince Renaud of St. Pol, and authorizing all officials to arrest him if he attempted to enter the capital.

"What does all this mean?" Gillette asked, after she had read the document. "Who is Prince Renaud of St. Pol, and what has he done to be denied entry to Paris?"

"He is a young noble of Artois," answered Porte-Panache, "who, when he was in Paris last year, was foolish enough to fall in love with Madame de Phalaris."

Gillette pouted; Gillette frowned; almost Gillette scowled.

"Do you call it foolish to fall in love?" she asked, sharply. Porte-Panache saw his blunder, and hastened to correct it with a caress.

"Foolish to fall in love with Madame de Phalaris, who happens to be—how shall I explain decorously to a young girl—"

SERAPHICA

Gillette burst into a fit of laughter.

"Sweet Heavens!" she cried. "Do you think that I do not know all about Madame de Phalaris, and that she is the—"

"The very particular friend of his Highness the Regent," Porte-Panache said, hurriedly interrupting Gillette's bluntness.

"Is she very handsome?" asked the girl.

Porte-Panache shrugged his shoulders with the air of a man of the world.

"A showy blowen to fire a green sapling. She took to the lad at first—they say she takes to anybody at first. This annoyed the Regent. So one night our spark was nabbed by a black band, crammed into a coach, and packed back to Artois with stern orders to revisit Paris no more."

"Is he trying to return now?" Gillette asked, who had followed Porte-Panache's narrative with the liveliest interest.

"Apparently," said the young guard, "to judge by this paper, which has been sent to every guard-house round Paris. Keep it, sweetheart, and if any one comes here who answers to that description send for me and you will do me a service."

"Of course, of course," Gillette answered, mechanically, as she slipped the paper into the pocket of her apron. In her heart she was feeling sympathetically sorry for the victim of love. A heavy step descending a stair warned the young couple that Adam Billaut was about to make his appearance; so, after another hurried embrace, Porte-Panache disappeared through the door-way and Gillette demurely returned to her tidying of the room.

V

A SEQUENCE OF STRANGERS

MASTER ADAM went to sun himself in front of his door, and to gaze philosophically along the great stretch of highway which led to cities that he had never seen, but whose names were always on the lips of those that came or went from his door. He blinked benignly at the prospect. He was perfectly contented with himself; he was perfectly indifferent to the attractions of the distant cities, the distant lands which drew into their webs so many wanderers. So long as he had custom enough to justify the Windmill in existing as an inn he asked no more of fortune. He was well-to-do, very well-to-do; he hoarded in his cellars, for his own use, excellent vintages that were seldom offered to the wayfarer; he did not depend upon the business of the Windmill to keep him in food and drink. But he had his pride in the ancient and honorable hostelry, and would have been as deeply grieved as was possible to one of his phlegmatic temperament at the thought of the Windmill falling from its place of pride. Happily it stood on a high-road, and had little need to fear complete oblivion. At least all travellers on that road must see it as they passed. Master Adam did not care in the least for travel himself. He considered it unnecessary to stray afield when one was

SERAPHICA

fairly comfortable in the narrow area where he had first drawn breath and seen light, and first learned in the fullness of time to appreciate the difference between the vintage of one year and the vintage of another. But he was glad that others cared for travel, for the inn's sake.

Steeped in an amiable complacency, and mellowed by his morning's draught, the landlord of the Windmill allowed his lids to fall. His lulling senses almost ceased to be aware of the swift movements of Gillette inside the inn as she came and went. He had become quite unconscious for perhaps sixty seconds when a distant sound on the roadway quickened him into a perception of existing things, and, lifting his lazy lids, he saw coming towards him, somewhat slowly, a horseman whose appearance portended custom; for, with the keen eye which such people have for anything connected with horse-flesh, he noted that the nag on which the stranger was riding was limping very decidedly on its off hind leg, and his practical mind easily deduced from this circumstance the probability that the traveller might have to accept the shelter of the Windmill for a considerable part of the day until the mishap to his steed was set right.

Always leisurely, always philosophic, Master Adam made no movement to receive his visitor, and it was not until the rider was within a few feet of his door, and was obviously drawing rein to dismount, that the landlord pricked himself into sufficient vitality to salute the newcomer. Eying him narrowly with an eye that was used to gazing upon all the various figures of wanderers and travellers, the landlord saw before him a young and handsome man of dignified carriage in a mulberry-colored redingote.

SERAPHICA

When the stranger had dismounted he hailed Master Adam in a voice which showed the readiness to command, and explained, what Master Adam already knew, that his horse had cast a shoe. He asked, as Master Adam knew he would ask, if the misfortune could be repaired, and he ended, as Master Adam knew he would end, by coming into the hostelry and demanding a measure of wine, while the horse was conveyed to the neighboring smithy to be shod.

If Master Adam had ever travelled so far as the province of Artois he would have had no difficulty whatever in recognizing in the simply dressed stranger who sat at his table the wild young heir to the principality of St. Pol. But Master Adam had never wandered so far, even in fancy. The very name of the province of Artois would have conveyed little to him beyond some vague association with the Flemings, who drank deep, which was, so far, to their credit; and no rumor of the doings of this wild young Prince had ever reached him.

So far as the landlord of the Windmill was concerned, Prince Renaud was safe from detection or molestation. Renaud, unaware of any danger, allowed himself, with a sigh of relief, to take his ease in the cool room from which Gillette had flitted, to stretch his booted legs in delicious ease, and to drink, with the ready good-nature of a tired traveller, the somewhat uncertain beverage which the landlord of the Windmill assured him to be the sunniest Burgundy ever put into cask.

His tranquillity did not last long. Very soon Master Adam entered the room deferentially, dismal with uncertain tidings. The only smith in the locality had chosen this particular afternoon to get drunk, and until he was

SERAPHICA

clear-witted enough to handle hammer and pincers there was no possibility of the horse being shod and of the traveller resuming his journey. Renaud fumed and fretted at first, being a young gentleman eager to push on and readily vexed by crosses. There was, indeed, the patent possibility of walking the few miles that still lay between the Windmill and Paris, but this did not appeal to Renaud's imagination. A knight-errant such as he imagined himself to be would cut, he thought, a poor figure approaching his mistress's city on foot.

While he pondered, his host, who was plausible as well as affable, did not fail to make a good case for delay, for testing his wares and his wines, and for visiting the historic Windmill, of which he gave him an account at great length: from the date of the first visit of Monsieur de Maugiron to the day before yesterday.

After he had heard Master Adam out, Renaud remembered that he was a philosopher, and surrendered to necessity. He would take a stroll in the garden; he would eat at the Windmill instead of in Paris; he would make the best of a bad business sensibly enough. Adam promised him excellent fare: a fowl would be on the spit in a jiffy; a ruddy vintage should twinkle in his cup; the wanderer would never regret his enforced delay in the shadow of the historic vans. Renaud smiled at his host's assurance, and followed him into the spreading garden of the inn, at the farther corner of whose trim extent—like a great gray rock rising out of waves of many-colored bloom—stood the ancient windmill that gave its name to the inn.

Leaving his guest to the full enjoyment of garden and mill, Master Adam returned to his inn, set Gillette to work upon the preparations for the feast, and, finding

SERAPHICA

that Renaud had left a considerable portion of his bottle untasted, proceeded to finish it himself—on the principle that any wine was too good to waste—and to reflect upon the advantage to an excellent landlord of being upon a good understanding with the local blacksmith.

Master Adam's placid reflections were once again interrupted—this time by the violent opening of the inn door, and the sudden appearance of two remarkable and wholly unfamiliar figures. One was a small, lean individual, clad entirely in black save for the collar and ruffles of fine lace round his neck and wrists. His eager, wrinkled face was surmounted by a monstrous periwig. The other was a tall, stalwart man, well past the prime of life, but still rioting in vitality, who was dressed in a handsome white uniform which set off to advantage his soldierly proportions. The smaller man advanced towards the landlord and addressed him in a tone of exciting mystery.

"Has a horseman passed this way," he inquired, "wearing a long, gray surtout and seemingly extremely young?"

Master Adam shook his head. "There was a young gentleman," he admitted, "who came to the Windmill this morning; but, though young, he was not excessively so, and he certainly was not habited in a gray surtout. His riding-coat was pronouncedly of a mulberry color."

The man in black shook his periwig. "This is not the man we want," he said. And then turning to his soldierly companion, he said, "That is well," with an expression of relief which brought no corresponding expression into the rubicund countenance of the other man.

A suggestion on the part of Master Adam that his

SERAPHICA

visitors might require refreshments was met by a hearty acquiescence from the soldier and a more indifferent one from the gentleman in black, and in another moment the host had despatched Gillette from the kitchen to the cellar seeking some liquor hidden in a distant bin which should be good enough to satisfy the military taste. This done, he retired to the garden and promptly fell asleep in a shady summer-house.

The moment he was gone the gentleman in the white uniform turned impatiently to his black-habited companion.

"In the name of Heaven, my friend," he said, "what is all this nonsense about a young gentleman in a gray surtout, and why have you persuaded me, in the sacred name of friendship—an appeal I can never resist—to accompany you on this journey? Here have we been driving post-haste for the better part of two days inquiring at every inn we passed if a youth in a gray surtout passed this way, and at every answer in the affirmative we have hurried on as if the very devil was after us. Now, for the first time, having reached this place by an unexpected short-cut, we are informed by the landlord that the young gentleman in a gray surtout has not passed, and yet your countenance appears to convey every sign of satisfaction at the information."

The black-habited gentleman smiled sardonically.

"My dear Vidame," he said, "there are things which we men of the robe understand better than you men of the sword."

"Very likely," said the soldier, rather stiffly, "but that does not explain to me why you and I have been bumping along dusty roads for two days inquiring at every inn if a

SERAPHICA

young gentleman, whom I have never even heard of before, and probably had I seen should not be interested in, passed this way."

The gentleman in black extended a long, lean finger, and prodded the chest of the soldier.

"A young gentleman in gray," he said, with a sorry smile, "might not interest you, but how about a young lady in gray?"

The soldier stared at him.

"A young lady!" he said. "You have been talking all along about a horseman."

"We have been talking about a horseman," said the gentleman in black, "but we have been thinking of a horsewoman." Then, seeing a look of astonishment on the face of his companion, with an expression of amusement he condescended to explain.

"My dear Vidame," he said, "we are on the track of a most astonishing adventure. We seem, as you say, to be pursuing a horseman, but we really are on the track of a horsewoman. We make anxious inquiries about a young gentleman in a gray coat, but the reason that our inquiries are so anxious is that the young gentleman we are inquiring for is no other than the Duchess Seraphica Valeria of Bapaume."

The soldier's mouth opened generously in the magnificence of his surprise.

"The Duchess Seraphica," snarled de Secherat, "ought to be confined in a convent until she comes to her senses. At this moment she is roaming about the world in a boy's dress, straddling a horse like a hussar, and making for no other place in the world than Paris."

The soldier's eyes shone with memories.

SERAPHICA

"I envy her," he sighed. "I envy any man, woman, or child who is on the way to Paris."

"You need not envy her long," de Secherat retorted. "The minx is not going to get to Paris, for all her pains."

"Why does she want to go to Paris just now?" the soldier queried. "And why in breeches rather than petticoats?"

The man in black leaned confidentially across the table.

"Listen!" he whispered. "I have pumped her women, bribed her women, frightened her women. I think I know all about the silly business. The pretty imp is vexed at the disdain of Renaud of St. Pol, she is jealous of his preference for Madame de Phalaris, and she is trotting off to Paris for the feminine purpose of picking a quarrel and making a scene."

The soldier stared, amazed. "Is it possible?" he gasped. "What a skittish whimsicality the kitten is!"

"Kittens love to run after moving objects," growled de Secherat. "But this kitten shall be carried back to Artois willy-nilly, purr she, or mew she, or scratch she."

The Vidame whistled a *reveille* thoughtfully.

"Suppose she refuses?" he questioned.

De Secherat shrugged his shoulders.

"She will not refuse," he asserted. "If she does I will advise her that, in her own interests, I may be compelled to resort to a little gentle suasion."

"And if she still refuse?" de Bethune inquired, in a somewhat gloomy tone. The mysterious expedition was taking a shape that did not greatly appeal to him.

"Then I must resort to the little gentle suasion," said de Secherat, decisively. "Come what may, we cannot have the Duchess Seraphica Valeria of Bapaume wander-

SERAPHICA

ing about the world like a mountebank in pursuit of an unwilling gentleman. Think of all the risks to an unprotected girl! A nice business if there were any blots upon the escutcheon."

It was Vidame's turn to shrug his shoulders.

"I think her Highness may very well be trusted to take care of herself," he said. "From all I know of her, she is perfectly capable of doing so unaided."

De Secherat frowned. "That would be all very well for gypsies and play-actresses and camp-followers, but for a duchess of Bapaume—"

The Vidame interrupted him. "Quite so, my dear friend, quite so! I was taking the thing in too barrack-room a spirit, I grant you. The matter is grave, very grave. But hang me if I see what you are going to do!"

De Secherat pressed the tips of his thin fingers together and pursed his thin lips.

"I am going to convince her Highness of the error of her ways. She is a woman, and therefore unreasonable, but she is a great lady, and therefore amenable to reason. There must be no scandal, no scene. You may rely upon me, my dear Vidame, who have handled with success the high diplomacies of Artois for more years than I care to count, to be qualified to manage a headstrong school-girl."

The Vidame looked dubious, and he opened his mouth as if he were going to give voice to dubiety, but he had no time to speak. De Secherat, who had been scanning narrowly the open road through the inn window, suddenly leaned forward, pointing an eager finger.

"There she is!" he whispered. "There she is!"

The Vidame, following with his glance the indicating

SERAPHICA

finger, saw at a distant turn of the road a cavalier riding briskly towards the inn door—a cavalier in a gray surtout.

The Vidame laid his hand upon de Secherat's extended arm.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, nervously. "For Heaven's sake, don't let us have a rumpus in a public inn-parlor!"

De Secherat disengaged himself with dignity.

"My dear Vidame," he said, with some acerbity, "rumpus is a word unfamiliar in our lexicon. When a situation is difficult we diplomatize it, we do not brutalize it. I propose that we withdraw quietly to our travelling-carriage, where it waits for us in the shade of the turn of the road yonder"—and he waved his lean hand in the direction opposite to that from which the cavalier in gray was approaching—"and in some quarter of an hour or so either the Duchess will have resumed her journey—in which case she must of necessity pass us—or she will have settled down in the inn for rest and refreshment. In either case it will be easy to find her alone, to take her cautiously unawares, and to settle our little differences of opinion satisfactorily without the least suggestion of scandal."

As he spoke he rose, and, walking cautiously across the floor, opened the door that conducted to the garden and looked through it. What he saw did not satisfy him. There was no apparent exit from the garden, which lay at the back of the inn, far removed from the high-road, at a turn in which his carriage now lingered. Moreover, the garden had an occupant—a distant gentleman in a mulberry-colored redingote, of whom he caught a glimpse in a distant alley. He shook his head, closed the garden

SERAPHICA

door quickly, and, skipping across the floor, while the Vidame followed his motions with staring eyes, opened the door behind him—the door that led to the domestic offices of the Windmill.

“This way,” he said, “leads, I observe, through the kitchen to a yard. We can reach the road and our carriage through that yard without running counter to her Highness on her arrival.”

As he spoke he led the way, followed by the soldier, whose honest countenance reflected clearly enough the conviction that the man of law, for all his brave show of confidence in his diplomatic methods, was not altogether unwilling to accept any decent excuse for a temporary delay in the inevitable meeting.

VI

THE GENTLEMAN IN GRAY

THE door that led into the garden closed behind the black coat and the white coat, and for a few seconds the solemn old clock had the inn's silence all to itself. Then Gillette returned from the cellar bearing carefully a cobwebbed black bottle, which she deposited gingerly upon the counter before she became conscious that she had the room to herself and that custom had vanished.

"Bah!" she said. "Where have they gone to?" And she went in the first instance to the main door, and opened it to see if the black coat and white coat were taking the air on the roadway. The moment she did so, however, she saw a sight which completely banished black coat and white coat from her thoughts.

A slim and exceedingly graceful cavalier, exquisitely dressed in soft gray, and wearing a long, gray surtout that reached half-way down his long, black riding-boots, was advancing towards the door with the obvious intention of entering. He had apparently conducted his horse to the stable himself, for there was no sign of the animal, and as he advanced he was flicking some of the country dust from his riding-boots with a dainty laced kerchief that was wholly unsuited for such an occupation.

Gillette stared at the stranger with an honest, open-

SERAPHICA

mouthed admiration that seemed instantly to divert its object, but which certainly was excusable enough. It was not every day, nor every week—no, nor every month neither—that so adorable a cavalier alighted at the threshold of the Windmill. The spruceness of his apparel, the fineness of his linen, the rare foppery of the lace about his throat and at his wrists, marked out the new-comer at once to the practised eye of a maid of an inn as a traveller of a special order, to be saluted deeply and served well. But if the cavalier had been habited in homespun the delicate beauty of his face would have fascinated the girl and amazed her, for it offered so quaint and pleasing a contrast to the composed address and easy masculine assurance with which the stranger greeted her.

“Good-day,” the cavalier said, in a soft, clear voice that caressed Gillette’s ear deliciously—“good-day, pretty girl. If the wine of the Windmill is as attractive as its waiting-maid it ought to make adorable drinking.”

And then and there, without more ado, the cavalier caught the girl’s upturned chin in the cup of his two hands and kissed her swiftly on each cheek with a dexterous rapidity that left her no time to resist, if her heart had suggested to her the faintest inclination to do so. Indeed, Gillette’s heart throbbed no such suggestion. She was familiar enough with the proffers of passing gallantry; she was ready enough to resent and dexterous enough to avoid such challenges when it pleased her; and she could repay the threatened salute with a ringing slap of open palm on extended cheek as skilfully as any inn-girl in all France. But the soft dominion of the stranger’s hands, the soft mockery of the stranger’s eyes, the soft sweetness of the stranger’s breath seemed to overcrow any possible

SERAPHICA

resistance, any possible resentment, and it is probable that the cavalier in gray might have gone on kissing Gillette for as long as he liked without let or hinderance. But a single salute on each of the plump cheeks seemed to content his temper, and, letting the girl slip as lightly as he had snared her, he passed her by and entered the cool darkness of the inn.

Gillette followed him, trembling a little, and dropped her visitor a very respectful courtesy. The bright-blue eyes of the cavalier seemed to widen with laughter beneath their long, black lashes at the girl's embarrassment.

"Well, pretty lass," he asked, "have you never been kissed by a man before?"

"Never by a man like you, Monseigneur," Gillette stammered. She was brisk enough with her tongue, as a rule, for gentle or simple, but there was something in this slim stranger which bewildered her, frightened her, delighted her.

The stranger laughed musically.

"True enough, sweeting," he said. "And now, because I am tired and because I am thirsty, you may give me a glass of wine, and you shall talk to me while I stretch my legs."

The cavalier seated himself in one chair, rested his boot-ed limbs on another, and looked teasingly at Gillette as she brought the cup of wine he called for. He eyed her provokingly, as he drank, over the edge of the chalice.

"Surely so pretty a maid is wasted on this wilderness," he said. "And on this wine," he added, with a smile, as he set down the cup after a sip that was, as Gillette noted, vastly different from the crude gulp of the ordinary thirsty customer. "Has a wise world no better work for you?"

SERAPHICA

Gillette crimsoned in spite of herself. She could not, with the best of wills, feel at ease with this affable youth.

"I should like to live in Paris," she answered, almost shyly, lowering her lids.

The dark eyebrows of the cavalier were lifted in surprise.

"Every one seems to want to live in Paris," he said, more to himself than to Gillette. The blue eyes were looking fixedly at her, but somehow Gillette felt certain that the thoughts which seemed suddenly to deepen their azure were not for her. In another instant, however, she was again their object as the cavalier questioned.

"What would you do in Paris?"

Gillette looked up alertly with a sudden determination to be bold with this questioning cavalier. She had half a mind to bid him mind his own business, but the smiling blue eyes conquered her, and she became frank instead of flippant.

"I want to be an actress," she confessed. And she made the confession almost with timidity, for the ambition seemed somehow more daring than ever, being thus blurted out to a stranger.

The cavalier looked not a little surprised.

"An actress!" he echoed. And then repeated the words again as a question: "An actress? Why an actress?"

Gillette proved herself no longer at a loss. She had found her tongue, and it ran along glibly.

"Because it is such a delightful life. It must be perfectly glorious to wear fine clothes, and be petted and applauded, and to be pelted with roses and love-letters and covered with jewels, and to eat and drink of the best, and drive in a golden coach, and lie on a golden bed, and have nothing whatever to do."

SERAPHICA

She paused for breath after an enumeration of the charms of the player's life, which appeared to afford the listener considerable entertainment.

"All these are pleasant things, indeed," the cavalier commented, "though I imagine that a cynic might find another side to the picture. Have you any qualifications for the practise of an art so alluring?"

"Qualifications!" Gillette's bright eyes widened with wonder as she repeated the word. "People tell me—Porte-Panache tells me—that I am very pretty."

The cavalier leaned back in the chair and laughed softly. It was such a delightful laugh that Gillette forgot to be offended, but waited patiently until the cavalier, sitting upright again, and smiling serenely after the little storm of hilarity, asked her:

"Who is Porte-Panache?"

Gillette blushed a very little.

"He is one of the customs guards. He is very fond of me. I am very fond of him. If I were an actress, with bags of money in my box, we would be married and live happily ever after."

A slight, ironical tightening of the fine mouth of the listener might have suggested to a keen observer some possible doubts of the happiness thus confidently predicted. But the doubt, if it existed, found no voice, and when the cavalier spoke it was but to pick up the thread of the conversation a sentence or so back.

"People—and Porte-Panache—are quite right. You are very pretty. And I suppose there is something to be said, pretty child, for your theory that your charms may be of service to you on the stage. But how do you propose to get there? It may not prove as easy as you think."

SERAPHICA

Gillette simpered self-consciously.

"That is a great secret," she whispered.

Thé cavalier made her a sweeping salutation.

"Be sure that I shall respect it," he promised.

Gillette was longing to chatter, so she chattered.

"Master Théophile Hardi passed this way a month ago."

Evidently the name of the great personage who presided over the destinies of the Regent's company of players was familiar to the cavalier, who nodded affirmation of the importance of Gillette's statement.

"Did he fall in love with you, little humming-bird?"

Gillette sighed.

"Oh, he did not look at me at all. He was much too busy, much too preoccupied. He was travelling to Compiègne as fast as horses could carry him on some pleasure of his Royal Highness the Regent. But when I knew who he was I wrote him a letter, and I bribed the postilion to slip it into his hand at the next stage in his journey."

The cavalier laughed merrily again.

"Adventurous imp! What did you say to the great man?"

"Why, I told him I wanted to go on the stage, wanted to play in Paris, said that I was considered good-looking by my friends, and begged him to break his journey here on his way back and have a look at me."

The cavalier clapped two gray-gloved hands together applaudingly.

"You waste no time," he said. "And when do you expect Master Hardi to come and carry you off to Paris?"

Gillette's pinkness grew pinker.

SERAPHICA

"You are laughing at me," she stammered.

"No, no!" the cavalier protested, encouragingly.

"Well," said Gillette, "he may be back any day, for I heard him say that he could not stop longer than a week in Compiègne. If he ever got my letter he may, perhaps, stop here on his way home; and if he does I may be fortunate enough to please him. Oh, it's only a chance, I know, but then, after all, life depends on such chances."

The cavalier's smiling, interested face grew suddenly grave.

"That is very true," he said. "Life depends on just such chances. There are a pair of us, child, and we are both dancing attendance upon a chance, and a wiseacre world would name us a brace of sillies."

Gillette had no idea what her companion was talking about, but she listened respectfully, as is due to quality when quality is pleased to make cryptic remarks. And just at that moment the door leading from the inn garden opened, and Prince Renaud stood in the aperture.

The cavalier in gray gave a little, imperious gesture of dismissal, and Gillette vanished swiftly into the remote domesticity of the inn. Then, rising to his feet, the later-comer made a gracious salutation to his predecessor, which Prince Renaud acknowledged amiably, if indifferently, enough.

Seeing that the table was yet vacant of a meal, Renaud strolled to the window and stared into the road, implying by this action an unwillingness to enter into the casual banality of an inn-parlor's conversation. But his unexpected companion was not to be thus lightly put off.

"I dare wager," he said, swinging his chair round so

SERAPHICA

as to have a good view of Prince Renaud's mulberry-colored coat—"I dare wager that we are both making for the same goal."

Renaud, thus patently addressed, turned for a moment from his contemplation of a covey of chickens who were staggering across the high-road, and answered civilly enough that it was very likely. Having conceded so much to importunity, he resumed his contemplation of the chickens, but his interlocutor refused to be baffled.

"And that goal, of course, is Paris?" the cavalier in gray persisted.

VII

A PASSAGE AT ARMS

RENAUD, without turning from the window and the chickens this time, answered curtly that he was going to Paris. The gentleman in gray rubbed his hands.

"Capital," he asserted. "So am I. We shall be cater-cousins."

Renaud turned for a moment from the window, with a frown upon his face.

"My humor, sir," he declared, sourly, "likes silence, likes solitude."

His chance acquaintance was not to be so dashed.

"Oh, I am none of your talkatives," the youth protested; "but I have taken a fancy to you. Do you ever take sudden fancies?"

Renaud was of a mind not to answer at all; then, his sense of good-manners conquering his sense of ill-humor, he muttered "No" gruffly enough.

Gray Coat nodded sympathetically.

"I see, you let people grow upon you. Well, I'll wager you will soon be as fond of me as I already am of you, which is saying a good deal, I vow. Why, what is this?"

The sudden query was caused by the reappearance of

SERAPHICA

Gillette bearing a well-spread tray which she set upon the table. Gillette explained that the tray and its contents represented the other gentleman's breakfast. The youth rubbed his hands approvingly.

"Excellent," he said, cheerfully. "The other gentleman and I will share fortunes. You may go, girl."

As Gillette again disappeared, Gray Coat turned again, and suavely addressed Renaud's angry back.

"Come, friend, to table," the young voice called, persuasively. "The meal seems most appetizing."

"I am not hungry," Renaud grunted, without turning round.

Gray Coat shook a disapproving head, took a seat at the table, and proceeded to attack the viands it displayed.

"That is very foolish of you," he declared, while thus engaged. "Sensible people are always hungry at the right time and in the right place. Therefore, I help myself to a liver-wing." The action was suited to the word. "May I offer you a glass of wine?"

Renaud, still glued to his window, answered stiffly that he was not thirsty. This appeared to pain Gray Coat, who resumed his harangue.

"That is more foolish still. Sensible people are always thirsty when they meet good wine, and on my honor this is by no means bad drinking. To your health—and your happiness in Paris."

To this courtesy, accompanied as it was by the emptying of a glass of wine, Renaud vouchsafed no response whatsoever. Thereupon the cavalier in gray began to laugh to himself softly—a teasing, irritating little laugh, that seemed to tickle the back of Renaud's neck as if butterflies were brushing their wings against him.

SERAPHICA

"Every one goes to Paris!" Gray Coat rambled on, mellifluously. "The witty wander thither to sell their wit in the best market; the fair to bargain for their graces; the foolish drift there, for the most part, to buy love at a high price—even with their lives, even with their honor."

The slightest imaginable shrug of the mulberry-colored shoulders betrayed to the speaker the fact that Renaud was listening to his speech. But Renaud gave no other sign of interest, and the leisurely stream of soliloquy flowed on.

"The wise, indeed, go to Paris as people go to a play-house—to sit at their ease in comfortable chairs, and divert themselves with a view of that astonishing comedy which the world calls the Regency, the most amazing comedy of ill-manners, surely, that was ever set upon the stage of a great city. There you shall see the whimsical spectacle of the first gentleman in France, the uncle Regent of the most Christian King, playing the fool according to his folly with as pretty a covey of knaves and wantons as ever rallied together in a thieves' kitchen, while Church and State, Robe and Sword, make ante-chamber together, impatient to kiss the finger-tips of the Strange Woman whom men call Madame de Phalaris."

Prince Renaud swung round from the window as if the butterflies had turned into bees and had stung him sharply. He advanced with blazing eyes and clinched hands towards the smiling nonchalance who lolled in the chair and eyed him derisively.

"Master Jackanape! Master Jackanape!" he said, hoarsely, "keep a civil tongue in your head when you speak of your betters, or you will find yourself flung into the road."

SERAPHICA

His tormentor, reclining lazily in his tilted chair, smiled impertinently, yet seemed to speak pacifically.

"I am very reluctant to speak uncharitably of any folk, whether their condition be better or worse than my own poor status, and I was but voicing public report when I attributed a high degree of court influence to the Marquise de Phalaris. But I may be wrong, of course; I may be wrong. For all I know to the contrary, the Regent's court may be a kind of nunnery and Madame de Phalaris its superexcellent abbess."

Renaud glowered till his face glowed as crimson as his mulberry coat, and he clasped and unclasped his fingers fiercely.

"You seem a very young fool," he growled, "and you are certainly a very foolish fool; but I warn you that neither your youth nor your folly will save you from tasting my whip across your shoulders if you presume again to mention in my presence the name of that lady."

With unruffled composure the cavalier in gray sought leisurely, and, having found, leisurely elevated to the level of his blue eyes a gold quizzing-glass which nestled, suspended by a slender gold chain, among the laces of his befrilled shirt. Through this he now proceeded to eye the infuriated Renaud as tranquilly as an entomologist might survey some eccentric insect that had just been added to his collection.

"May I ask," he said, very suavely, "if I have the privilege of speaking to a brother of Madame de Phalaris?"

Renaud, fairly dazzled by the insolent assurance of his antagonist's manner, snapped out a menacing "No!" which wholly failed to alarm the possessor of the quizzing-glass, who went on, quietly:

SERAPHICA

"You cannot be the lady's husband, for the lady is, as I understand, a widow, and you seem much too solid for a ghost. You are certainly too young to be the lady's father, and you are, I should hope, no less certainly too old to be the lady's son. By what title, therefore, do you take up the horsewhip in her defence?"

"By that of a friend!" shouted Renaud, now beside himself with rage. And bounding to the window-sill, where his riding-whip lay, he caught it up and turned furiously upon his enemy, hot with resolve of chastisement. But even as he advanced, his opponent, shedding nonchalance like a garment, skipped lightly to the other side of the table, whipped out his sword, and across the extemporized barrier presented the point of a shining blade with such scientific precision in the immediate neighborhood of Prince Renaud's heart, that in spite of himself that indignant gentleman was compelled to recoil.

With his weapon well in tierce, the cavalier in gray renewed his homily imperturbably.

"You are distressing yourself to little purpose, my good friend. If you have the slightest right to champion the lady to whom I have alluded, and who may be no less than a vestal virgin, for all that I care, I shall be delighted to afford you satisfaction for any annoyance that my lightness of speech may have provoked."

Renaud eyed the slender, well-poised figure angrily.

"Satisfaction!" he snapped. "Satisfaction! Since when have ill-mannered school-boys aped the speech of men?"

The youth in gray smiled indulgently.

"You are hot," he said, "and cross, and it is now your turn to forget yourself. A few minutes' sword-play will

SERAPHICA

have the effect of lightning in clearing a stormy atmosphere."

With his disengaged hand he drew a handsome gold watch from his fob and laid it upon the table.

"If within the next five minutes you touch me once, lightly or deeply, I will, if any breath be left to me, apologize to the lady. But if you fail to do so, then I shall hold you to this condition: that if at any time I call upon you to assert at the sword's point that the lady we have quarrelled over bears the dearest name in the world to you, you will not fail to answer to the challenge."

"I can agree to that with all my heart," Renaud answered, hardly able, in spite of his irritation, to restrain his laughter at the lad's uncompromising impertinence. "But for the moment I warn you, young gentleman, to abandon any thoughts of continuing your journey. I will play your surgeon and let a little blood for you."

"Who knows?" answered the youth, carelessly. "Are you ready?" And he extended his sword with a dexterous swiftness that compelled Renaud to break ground.

"The devil!" he cried. "You are in a red-hot hurry. Will you not strip off your coat?"

"Why waste time?" responded the gray cavalier. "I can fight as well or as ill in my frock as without it. Once again, are you ready?"

"Yes!" thundered Renaud, launching at his foe a blow that was intended to transfix his shoulder. But to Renaud's absolute astonishment the youth, without yielding an inch of ground, or seeming scarcely to move his arm, parried the thrust with an imperceptible, irresistible turn of the wrist.

"Four minutes," said the youth, softly, to himself,

SERAPHICA

after a rapid glance at the table where the gold watch lay and ticked gently.

The words irritated Renaud like a sting, and once again he attacked his opponent vehemently, showering thrust upon thrust with a swiftness that was only outdone by the celerity with which the cavalier in gray succeeded in parrying every lunge, meeting every double and anticipating every feint with which Renaud tried to break through or beat down his indomitable guard. What particularly galled Renaud was the fact that his foeman contented himself with parrying his attack and made no attempt whatever to *riposte*, but stood his ground as coolly as if he were a fencing-master in his school, playfully humoring some too ambitious pupil.

Suddenly the youth glanced again at the face of the watch, cried out in silvery exultation that the five minutes were up, and then—Renaud never knew how it happened, but it did happen—his enemy's blade seemed somehow to twist around his own; there was a sharp, quick jerk which jarred his wrist, and the next moment Renaud's rapier was twitched from his fingers, and flew, describing a glittering parabola, to a far corner of the room and fell rattling on the floor. The victor immediately clicked his heels together, saluted the disarmed man gravely, and lowered his point.

"That was a trick!" Renaud cried, angrily.

The other smiled sweetly.

"There are no tricks, only winning and losing!" the victor cried, gayly. "I happen to have won and you happen to have lost, and we need think no more about it. I shall keep you to your promise, I warn you, some time when the conditions are more favorable to the ar-

SERAPHICA

bitrament of arms; but in the mean time I am quite willing, if you will, to pledge any lady you admire in a cup of wine with you. Then, as we are both making for Paris, we may, if it pleases you, continue our journey together."

There was an irresistible good-humor in the youth's address which thawed Renaud's sulkiness.

"You have the advantage of me every way," he confessed, "and our quarrel is at an end for the present."

"Well said, well done," commented the gentleman in gray, as he filled two glasses from the flagon that reclined in its cradle upon the table. He held his own glass up to the light, and eyed the ruby fluid appreciatively; also eyed it thoughtfully, as if, indeed, it were a magic crystal in whose clear deeps the future might be clearly read. Had it been such, even the gazer, blithely desiring, blithely accepting adventure, might have been surprised not a little at what the mystic crystal had to show. But the red wine was no more, and happily no less, than red wine, which, if it revealed no hidden secrets, was at least a good and kindly creature that cheered the drinker's heart.

"Shall we drink to our hearts' desires?" Gray Coat questioned, with a decided smile and an undecided sigh.

Renaud caught up his glass.

"Will you pledge Madame de Phalaris?" he asked, eagerly.

Gray Coat nodded.

"Willingly," came the answer, "if you will pledge my idol. Strange! Here we be, two ordinary fellows enough, and we both love great ladies. My star is the Duchess Seraphica of Bapaume!"

SERAPHICA

Renaud stared at his companion, feeling both startled and suspicious. "The Duchess Seraphica of Bapaume!" he repeated.

Gray Coat smiled at him innocently.

"She, indeed. Am I not a mad lover? Have you ever had the good-fortune to see that angelic creature?"

"I may say that I have never seen her," Renaud answered, with a note of triumph in his voice, for he saw a chance of paying off a part of his score against this pleasant jackanapes. "But now I voice public report that she is a 'merry devil in petticoats'—a drinking, smoking, swaggering vixen—"

He broke off on the interruption of the lifted hand and slightly lifted voice of the cavalier in gray.

"Slander, sir, slander. She was much her father's friend, and learned some manly arts from him; but I believe her womanly, and I pity her with all my heart, for they say she is going to wed her neighbor of St. Pol, a little hunchbacked, pudding-faced clod, with no more wit than a ninny."

It was now Renaud's turn to interrupt, and he did so somewhat hotly, though he did his best to keep cool.

"Believe me, you are wrong!" he cried. "I know something of the man; he is no such monster; he will pass in a crowd. But he will never marry the Duchess Seraphica."

"Well, well," said Gray Coat, "so much the better for her, and so much the better for me. Let us drink to our ladies. Here is to Madame de Phalaris!" And Gray Coat lifted a glass.

"Here is to Seraphica of Bapaume!" Renaud shouted, lustily. And as he drained his bumper a vision of the fair

SERAPHICA

face of Madame de Phalaris seemed to float on the red tide, and thoughts of her to run with it into every channel of his body. Then he caught the eyes of his companion fixed upon him with a twinkle of humor in them, and he colored slightly.

"Now," he said, "as we ride together, I'll go see if the smith is sober and our horses fit for the road."

VIII

A MYSTIFICATION

RENAUD went out through the garden to look after the horses, and the moment he was gone the Duchess flung herself into a chair with a little cry of almost infantine delight, and clapped her hands together gleefully.

"Everything is going wonderfully," she said to herself. "There never was such an adventure since the world began, and if it goes on as well as it has started I shall call myself the luckiest girl in the world!"

Even as she thought these thoughts the door that faced her opened, and in a twinkling her radiant dream was dissipated into flagrant reality—or, rather, it seemed for a moment as if the joyous real had disappeared to give place to an exceedingly disagreeable dream that was even a nightmare; for the figure that now stood before Seraphica seemed to her astonished senses to be no other than the Artois lawyer, Popelin de Secherat, whom she imagined to be at that moment many miles away.

Almost unconsciously she put up her hands to rub her eyes, in the hope that when she had done so the unwelcome apparition would vanish. But the hope was vain; de Secherat was still before her, smiling an unkindly smile, and making an outward show of solemn salutation.

SERAPHICA

"Is that you?" the little Duchess gasped, for she could think of nothing else to say in her bewilderment.

The lawyer's brow deepened, the lawyer's unpleasant smile widened.

"It is I, indeed, your Highness," he said. "I have no doubt your Highness is surprised to see me and; may I say that I, on my part, am not a little surprised to see your Highness in this place and in this condition?"

As he spoke he made a comprehensive gesture with his right hand, which seemed to draw attention to and condemn the Duchess's masculine costume.

The Duchess shrugged her shoulders; she was beginning to recover from the first shock of her surprise, and she was as determined as ever to have her own way.

"I don't remember," she said, suddenly, "that I solicited any opinion of yours upon my actions."

The lawyer's gestures were deprecatory, but the lawyer's tone was firm.

"It is the privilege," he said, "of a guardian of the Duchess of Bapaume at all fitting times to offer the counsel of his experience to his ward."

"I do not consider this to be a fitting time," the Duchess answered, sharply. "I am for the moment occupied with my own business and my own pleasure, and I shall ask you to be so good as to allow me to follow both untrammelled by advice or suggestion."

De Secherat shook his head very solemnly.

"Unfortunately, your Highness," he said, "that is just what I am unable to do. While I am willing to refrain from any comment upon the extraordinary—shall I say escapade?—which has brought us both together here, I

SERAPHICA

must, however, respectfully, but very firmly, insist upon your immediate return to your estates."

Seraphica began to laugh a little angry laugh.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," she said. "I am the Duchess of Bapaume, and if it pleases me to take a holiday according to my own inclinations, I do not see what right you or any one else has to interfere with me."

"Your Highness," said de Secherat, gravely, "does not appear to be profoundly acquainted with the laws which govern the relations of guardian and ward. In those articles of the law which relate to such matters it is naturally provided that no ward such as you are shall leave her estates without the knowledge and express sanction of her guardians, and, as you are well aware, your Highness has not obtained that sanction. I think I may also assure your Highness that the sanction would not be forthcoming under the present conditions, and I must once again request you to return with me at once to your duchy."

"No! No! No!" Seraphica answered, imperatively. "I will do nothing of the kind!"

"I trust your Highness will listen to reason," de Secherat began, but the Duchess interrupted him.

"That is the last thing my Highness proposes to do at this moment," she said. "I propose to go on with my journey, and to wish you a very good-morning."

The lawyer's smile had faded altogether from his face by this time.

"That is impossible," he said. "I must for the third time repeat my request to your Highness, with the most respectful insistence in my power."

SERAPHICA

"And if I refuse for the third time?" said the Duchess. "What then?"

"I hope your Highness will not drive me to a disagreeable necessity," said de Secherat; "but, under the conditions, the laws must be obeyed, and if the worst comes to the worst, I shall be compelled to employ—how shall I put it?—a little gentle suasion to induce you to return to your duchy."

"Do you mean that you will use force?" the Duchess said, staring at him in indignation.

The lawyer bowed apologetically.

"I should greatly regret the necessity," he said; "but there is one thing that must be done: the Duchess of Bapaume must return to Bapaume. I have a carriage and a companion waiting at the turn of the road, and if you will be good enough to accompany me, we shall be on our way home in a few minutes."

"But if I refuse to go," the Duchess asked, "you will then compel me?"

The lawyer's answer was deprecatory and decided.

"I am compelled," he said, "to act in the interests of the duchy, and the interests of the duchy demand, most imperatively, indeed, that you should return to Bapaume, and that this episode should be ignored by those who now know nothing about it and forgotten by the few who do. Only I myself and the Vidame de Bethune, who accompanies me, and, of course, your own women, are aware of what you have done, and naturally we shall be very careful to keep that knowledge to ourselves."

The Duchess pulled nervously at her handkerchief, and a thousand desperate resolves were chasing one another through her mind. One that seemed more feasible than

SERAPHICA

the others caught her fancy, and decided her to an experiment.

"The Vidame de Bethune is with you?" she asked, and her voice and bearing, as she spoke, became suddenly feminine and almost frightened.

The lawyer nodded.

"The Vidame," he said, "is a man upon whose discretion I can absolutely rely, and I judged his company necessary as representing the military element in the number of your Highness's guardians."

The little Duchess hurried her handkerchief to her eyes, and began to sob plaintively.

The lawyer was as delighted as he was surprised at this sudden surrender of her masculine attitude.

"Oh, dear!" she sighed. "I could not possibly consent to let myself be seen like this by the Vidame de Bethune!"

"I can assure you—" de Secherat began. But the Duchess would not suffer him to proceed.

"No! No! No!" she said. "If I really must go back, I suppose I must; but I cannot consent to be seen in this get-up by the Vidame."

"Well, I don't see why it matters," the lawyer said. "You have been seen by a great many people."

"Yes, yes," insisted the Duchess, tearfully, "but not by the Vidame. No! No! I really could not stand it!"

"I ask your Highness what is to be done?" the lawyer went on.

He was so pleased to find the Duchess more yielding than he had dared to hope that he was willing to humor her in what seemed to him, under the circumstances, a singular caprice.

"I do not know," she sobbed. And then suddenly:

SERAPHICA

"Oh yes, I do! The Vidame is sure to have his military cloak with him."

The lawyer nodded.

"Yes, he has," he said. "I noticed it in the carriage."

"Will you," said the little Duchess, with a cry of gratification, "go and fetch me the Vidame's cloak! That will cover me completely, and then, if I must, I will accompany you."

The lawyer looked at her a little suspiciously.

"I am, of course, more than willing to obey your Highness's request. May I, however, be favored with your Highness's promise not to leave the room until I return?"

The Duchess, with her face buried in her handkerchief, sobbed out an assurance that she would not leave the room until her guardian returned.

The lawyer, thus reassured, for he knew the extreme truthfulness of Seraphica's nature, saluted the Duchess respectfully, and hurriedly quitted the inn.

The moment he had done so Seraphica leaped to her feet, tossed her handkerchief lightly in the air, and caught it again as it fell down, and cried out, exultingly:

"I shall juggle the old fool yet!"

Then, running swiftly to the door which led to the kitchen, she opened it, and cried loudly for Gillette.

As Gillette came into the room, pink and panting with rapidity, Seraphica pounced upon her as a hawk unhooded swoops upon its quarry.

"Quick! quick!" she commanded. "You must change clothes with me at once!"

If Gillette was pink before, she now flamed a splendid

SERAPHICA

poppy, and thrust at Seraphica with angry, protesting hands.

"How dare you?" she stammered.

Seraphica realized the meaning of her indignation, and raged for a moment at her own success in masquerade.

"Don't be silly!" she snapped. "Male feathers don't always make male birds. I am no more of a man than you are!" And as she spoke she plucked her waistcoat apart and opened her laced shirt-frills convincingly.

While Gillette's astonishment was endeavoring to crystallize itself into some such conventional form as "Well, I never!" the Duchess swept on in impetuous speech.

"Child, your fortune is made if you do as I tell you. Take this in earnest of better things. It is worth a small fortune!" And she pulled a diamond ring from her finger and thrust it into Gillette's surrendering palm. "And now off with your clothes, girl, for the love of Heaven!"

Even as she spoke the Duchess had peeled off her coat and waistcoat, and, having spied a boot-jack in a corner, had seized it, and, seating herself, was jerking vigorously to free herself from her riding-boots.

Gillette gasped at her.

"We can't change our things here!" she gasped, fumbling nervously at the neck of her bodice.

"We can if you don't waste time chattering," Seraphica retorted, sharply.

"Somebody may come in," Gillette hesitated.

"Somebody won't come in," said the Duchess, who had already liberated her legs from their leather cases and looked very slim in her white silk stockings. She stooped to unfasten the knees of her gray riding-breeches,

SERAPHICA

and Gillette, encouraged by her decision, was tremblingly divesting herself of her bodice, when the sound of steps was heard on the garden path approaching the room.

Gillette crimsoned again and gave a stifled scream. Seraphica rapped out a brisk military oath which had been a favorite of her father's.

"We are undone!" cried Gillette.

"Not quite, unfortunately," laughed the Duchess, abandoning the buttons, and sweeping her shed garments—coat, waistcoat, and boots—into a comprehensive armful. Her quick eyes circled the room, and smiled as they encountered a screen that stood in the corner—a great green screen with sprawling gilt dragons.

"The screen! the screen!" she whispered. And pushing Gillette with unceremonious directness, she got herself and the girl and her bundle ensconced behind its roomy shelter just as the handle of the garden door turned. Somebody opened the door and came into the room. The Duchess could not tell who it was, and she did not greatly heed. She was far too busy in stripping Gillette noiselessly of her gown and petticoat, and aiding her in the necessary change that should convert the maid into a breeched and booted cavalier, and the dainty cavalier into a dainty serving-woman.

As a matter of fact, the intruder was no other than Master Adam Billaut himself coming on a familiar quest, to see if any wine were left in the bottles. Finding a good glassful, he drank it slowly (Seraphica could hear it gurgling down his throat), after which he yawned heavily, and then, feeling that his presence was not needed, as he always left Gillette to look after the reckonings, and conscious that he had a great desire for sleep, he quitted the

SERAPHICA

room as leisurely as he had entered it, and made his way up-stairs again to his beloved bed. Seraphica, peeping round the edge of the screen, satisfied herself that the coast was clear, and emerged in now unfamiliar skirts, merrily dragging by the hand Gillette, breeched, booted, coated, hatted, and periwigged into a sufficiently comely semblance of the gentleman in gray, with a sword by her side and some gold in her pocket. Seraphica so bubbled with laughter that she could scarcely find breath to instruct the girl, who stood looking at her unfamiliar legs.

"Now, for Heaven's sake, don't look so awkward!" Seraphica ordered. "All you have to do is to keep your handkerchief well over your face, and to seem to be sobbing bitterly. An elderly gentleman in black will be here in a minute or two, who will envelop you in a military cloak and lead you away. You are to go wherever he takes you, and to do whatever he tells you, and not to say one word of any kind until you are at the end of your journey."

"My journey!" Gillette echoed, in amaze. "Where am I going to? What is going to happen to me?"

"You are going to the palace of Bapaume," Seraphica answered. "I am the Duchess Seraphica."

Gillette gave a little cry.

"You are the Duchess Seraphica, the young lady whom Prince Renaud of St. Pol—"

"Yes, yes!" Seraphica interrupted. "You needn't dwell upon that. I know all about it, thank you kindly. But I am the Duchess Seraphica, and I have my own reasons for wanting a holiday, and my foolish old guardian has his own reasons for trying to stop me. He caught

SERAPHICA

me here, and he thinks he is going to take me back, but he isn't, you see."

Gillette looked and voiced protestation.

"You don't mean to say that I have to go back with him," she said, "and play at being you. Oh, I couldn't, I couldn't! Why, they will do something dreadful to me when they find out the trick!"

"No, they won't; no, they can't," Seraphica insisted. "You always said you wanted to be an actress. Well, you never will have a chance to play such a part again, and certainly not at such a price. Why, that diamond is worth at the least three thousand livres, and besides that I shall take you into my service when I return from Paris, and you shall marry your lover and be as happy as the days are long! Now, please don't argue any more."

Seraphica put her hand into the pocket of the girl's surtout and pulled out a note-book. Tearing out a sheet of paper, she hurriedly wrote on it in pencil these words:

"The girl who carries this paper is acting in obedience to my orders. She is to be well entertained until I return."

"SERAPHICA."

The sight of this document seemed to restore Gillette's equanimity, and none too soon, as it happened; for at that moment Seraphica caught sight, through the window, of the lawyer's peruke bobbing pedantically along the road. The law and order of Bapaume was coming to claim its lawless, disorderly little mistress. In a twinkling Seraphica had jammed Gillette down onto a chair, and thrust the handkerchief into her fist and her fist against her face.

SERAPHICA

"Sob," she whispered—"sob, and say nothing!" And she whisked herself and her petticoats behind the screen, and listened there, choking with suppressed chuckles, for the lawyer's entry.

The door opened, and de Secherat came solemnly in, nursing on his bended arm the great scarlet cloak of the Vidame. Gillette, with her face buried in the handkerchief, sobbed loudly, and her shoulders shook.

"Will your Highness," said the lawyer, "allow me to invest you with this garment?" As he spoke he rested the large mantle on Gillette's shoulders, and the girl unprotestingly allowed herself to be enveloped in its folds, and suffered the capote to be slipped over her head. Still sobbing plaintively, she rose as de Secherat took her hand, and suffered him to conduct her, swathed in crimson cloth, slowly and solemnly towards the door and through the door on to the highway.

Instantly Seraphica slipped from her ambush, and, crouching at the window, peeped through after the retreating pair. She watched them to the turn of the road, lost them behind a clump of trees where she suspected the carriage to be concealed, and then, turning to the chair which Gillette had just quitted, she dropped on it, a delighted imp in petticoats, and fairly rocked with satisfied laughter.

IX

RENAUD IN DISTRESS

ALMOST unconsciously the Duchess slipped her hand into the pocket of her apron, and encountered there a piece of folded paper. Still almost unconsciously she withdrew it from its concealment, and, opening it, discovered that it was a piece of printed paper, and seemingly in the nature of a kind of notice or proclamation. Her indifferent eye, glancing heedlessly over its surface, suddenly became attentive. She read it through carefully once again, realizing as she did so what a curious chance had placed such important information in her possession; for the paper which she had found was the circular which Porte-Panache had given to Gillette that morning—the circular addressed to all the barrier guards, describing minutely the appearance of Prince Renaud, and calling upon them to detain his person.

Among her many masculine accomplishments Seraphica included the art of whistling, and she greeted her discovery with a prolonged whistle, which, beginning in a note of cheerful astonishment, finally throbbed itself out in amused speculation. The great powers of the state were playing her game, it seemed; all she had to do was to stand by and let Prince Renaud ride on his ride to Paris, serenely confident that at the first gate he passed

SERAPHICA

through he would be recognized, arrested, and sent packing back to Artois without having had so much as a glimpse of his divinity.

The Duchess rubbed her hands in an ecstasy of excitement; then suddenly her amusement gave way to gravity. After all, this was not in the least what she had intended; if Renaud never got to Paris, never met again Madame de Phalaris, there would be no opportunity for her to fight the good fight she had anticipated; and there would be no advantage to her in the fact that Prince Renaud was thus by force deprived of intercourse with the favorite. Such a condition of things was only too surely calculated to make that impetuous young gentleman more desperately in love than ever with Madame de Phalaris, and less likely than ever to be placed in a position which Seraphica could have her desired opportunity of practising enchantment upon him. Therefore, she decided that she would counteract the Regent's plans, and that she would devote her intelligence to a singular service enough—that of furthering Prince Renaud's desire to arrive in Paris.

After all, what she wanted was, if she could, to win him away from the favorite against the favorite's will, and so, while she laughed at the subjugated Prince, revenge herself upon the highly objectionable friend of the Duke of Orleans. The only question now was, How would she be able to assist the Prince?

As she was turning over in her mind many possible expedients which she immediately had to decide were impossible, the subject of her thoughts opened the door and came into the room. He looked around him in some astonishment, which, for the space of a second, Seraphica failed to understand. Then she realized that he was, of

SERAPHICA

course, looking for the cavalier in gray, who was to be the companion of his journey.

Renaud promptly put his wonder into words. "There was a gentleman here a few minutes ago," he said. "Do you know what has become of him?"

"A gentleman in a gray surtout?" Seraphica queried.

Renaud nodded.

"The gentleman has been called away," Seraphica said, demurely. "A friend came for him just now in a travelling-carriage, and was so urgent in beseeching his company that he could not refuse him. He left his excuses with me, and expressed a hope that you and he would meet in Paris."

Renaud frowned. "The devil take the changeable imp!" he muttered. "He is as shifty as a weather-cock and as impudent as a monkey."

"There are more important things," Seraphica said, pertly, "than the absence of your travelling companion."

As she spoke she tripped lightly across the room towards him, and with a dexterous movement extended in front of his face the square of printed paper which she had found in Gillette's apron-pocket.

Prince Renaud drew back in astonishment. "What is this?" he asked.

"Read for yourself," she answered.

And Renaud, thus adjured, took the paper from her and began to read it. Instantly his face was moved with the liveliest anger. Striking the paper with his clinched fist, he ejaculated:

"Cur! Cur! To use such means as this!"

The cool, clear voice of Seraphica interrupted his in-

SERAPHICA

dignation. "I thought the paper would interest you, Monseigneur."

And she dropped him a dainty courtesy.

Renaud looked fixedly at her. He had paid no attention whatever to Gillette when he had arrived at the inn, and could not for the life of him have told what manner of girl she was. Yet now the face of Seraphica, as it looked into his, seemed strangely familiar as well as strangely attractive, and he found himself racking his brain to think where he could have seen her before, or why, if he had seen her on his arrival, he had failed to notice how extremely attractive the maid of the inn was. The absence of the powdered periwig and the profusion of Seraphica's liberated black tresses were sufficient factors in her metamorphosis to prevent him from thinking that the maid resembled the gentleman in gray.

"You know me?" he said.

Seraphica answered, quietly: "The description corresponds too closely with your Highness's mien and bearing to allow me to imagine that I am mistaken."

"Yes," said Renaud, reflectively, "the description is clear enough—a thought too flattering, perhaps, but still too clear for evasion. What an ill-bred dog this Regent is who uses such means as these against a rival!"

"All is fair in love and war," murmured Seraphica, demurely.

"A vilely abused proverb," said Renaud, sententiously; "though, indeed, my business with Philip of Orleans had to do with war as well as love. I meant to challenge the rascal to a bout of sword-play, that the world might see which was the better man, the Regent of France or Renaud of St. Pol."

SERAPHICA

"That would have been bad for the Regent," said Seraphica, quietly, "for I have heard tell that your Highness is an invincible swordsman."

Renaud glanced sharply at her. Did she know anything, he wondered, of his recent encounter with the gentleman in gray? Maids have a way of eavesdropping, of peeping through key-holes, of listening at chinks in doors. She might have witnessed his discomfiture. But the face of Seraphica, looking into his, was serenely impassive, and he banished the thought at once and went on with his reflections.

"Of course," he said, "the Regent did not know of my intention to challenge him, otherwise I cannot believe that any gentlemen would have resorted to so ignoble a trick for getting rid of an adversary. Well, whatever happens, I must push on; and—who knows?—I may perhaps be successful in evading the watchfulness of his guards."

Seraphica shook her head decisively. "I do not think there is the faintest chance of that," she said. "You must pass through one of the gates to get into Paris. All the gates are watched. In making the attempt you are practically surrendering yourself into the hands of your enemies. There is not a barrier of Paris which will not be furnished with a copy of that paper, and whose guards will not be on the alert to obey its instructions."

Prince Renaud could not but admit the truth of Seraphica's statement.

"Well," he sighed, "there is nothing for it but to go on and be arrested; for, I presume, you would hardly wish the Prince of St. Pol to turn back from an adventure for a coward's threat?"

"I certainly would not wish your Highness to turn

SERAPHICA

back from an adventure upon which he has set his heart," said Seraphica. "But it is possible there are better ways of pursuing your purpose than seem to have entered your illustrious head."

Though the girl spoke in the most respectful tone, it was impossible for Prince Renaud to resist an uneasy conviction that, behind her little mask of prim politeness, she was laughing heartily at him and his predicament.

"Perhaps you," he said, with a salutation, "may be able to instruct me how to avoid the snares of my enemies. You seem an exceedingly intelligent damsel."

Seraphica gave him another courtesy. "I remember a fable," she said, "about a mouse who helped a lion; perhaps a serving-maid might help a prince. Why should you not get into Paris in disguise?"

"A good idea," said Prince Renaud. "But what disguise? And where to find one?"

"I have more than one change of wearing apparel," said Seraphica, simply. "Your Highness has a smooth and pleasing face, and might very well pass for a woman in woman's wear."

Prince Renaud frowned furiously. "Heaven have mercy, maiden! Do you seriously propose that a prince of St. Pol should smuggle himself into Paris in a servant-girl's petticoats!"

Seraphica shrugged her shoulders. "I have heard of women who passed themselves off as men before this," she said, with a queer smile, "and I do not see why, once in a way, a man might not pass himself off as a woman."

Renaud shook his head. "The idea is intolerable," he said. "Suppose I were to be discovered! Imagine the triumph of the Regent, the exultation of the Parisian wits,

SERAPHICA

and my unbearable humiliation—Prince Renaud in petticoats! Oh, the idea is preposterous, ludicrous, ridiculous! Let us waste no more time in denouncing it.”

“As you please,” said Seraphica, gallantly, mastering her extreme inclination to indulge in laughter; “we must try and think of something else.”

“Yes, but what?” said Prince Renaud, slapping his knee.

“What, indeed?” said Seraphica, nursing her chin thoughtfully.

At this moment their speculations were interrupted. The inn door was thrown noisily open, and an important-looking person appeared upon the scene.

X

ENTER THÉOPHILE HARDI

THE new-comer was a stout, well-built, middle-aged man of something over middle height, slightly overdressed for a burgess, slightly underdressed for a noble, and having about him a peculiar manner which was neither that of burgess nor noble, but suggested a kind of amalgam of both manners, with a suggestion of the manners of every imaginable class of human citizen. The smooth face had that whimsical air of perennial youth, and the curious, mask-like glaze which would at once have betrayed to any person familiar with the stage the calling of the intruder.

On the instant Seraphica had guessed the stranger's name and divined his purpose; but if she had not, she would have been soon enlightened by the stranger himself.

Glancing round him with little, quick, active eyes, that seemed at once to be looking for the most important person in any audience, in order to address himself to it, the stranger surveyed the pair, appreciated that one was obviously a gentleman and the other a waiting-maid, and immediately addressed himself indirectly to the gentleman, although his business was directly with the waiting-maid.

"I am Théophile Hardi," he said, with pompous

SERAPHICA

solemnity. "I am the head of Monseigneur the Regent's company of players. I am in a great hurry to get to Paris. I have paused here on my way in consequence of this letter. Did you write it?"

Drawing from his waistcoat-pocket a small piece of paper, he handed it to Seraphica, who took it with a smile and opened it.

It was an ill-written, ill-spelled scrawl, simple enough and touching enough in its almost pathetic appeal to a great man to take notice of a little woman, and in its tremulous audacity of confidence in the writer's own future.

It was an age in which great ladies, for the most part, wrote and spelled as badly as housemaids, but the little Duchess of Bapaume was an exception to the rule, and wrote and spelled French with a commendable facility and accuracy. Nevertheless, she returned the letter to Master Hardi with a smile and a courtesy, and accepted the authorship of its astonishing orthography and its beseeching entreaty.

Théophile Hardi glanced at her not unapprovingly, while Prince Renaud, unwilling to seem to interfere in a matter of business with which he had no concern, withdrew to the garden, and occupied himself in speculating as to the means by which he might succeed in defeating the vigilance of the Regent, and arrive in Paris to fling himself at the feet of the divine Marquise.

"You are a pretty girl," Théophile Hardi said, condescendingly, "but I suppose you are aware, young woman, that at this moment the profession which I adorn is positively overflowing with pretty girls. They come to us from all parts of the world; and even if they did not,

SERAPHICA

Paris itself is a rose-garden of loveliness from which we could always gather bouquets of beauty. Good looks are all very well, but art"—and here he slapped himself upon the chest as if the whole art of acting was concealed behind that spacious surface—"demands something more than good looks. We act to please not merely men of taste like his Royal Highness, who naturally have a kindly eye for the outward seeming of our players, but also for women of taste like that serene Star of the Court, Madame la Marquise de Phalaris."

For one single second the little white upper teeth of the Duchess pricked themselves sharply into the lower lip at the mention of the name of the Marquise de Phalaris, and the large blue eyes of the Duchess flashed angrily. Only for a second; then Seraphica was Gillette again. Bobbing another courtesy to the great man, and seizing the opportunity of his spent breath to reply to his volubility, she said, respectfully:

"What you say is very true, Monseigneur."

In another moment the actor's large hand floated towards her with an air of protestation that had also something of the dignity of a benediction.

"Not Monseigneur, my child, not Monseigneur," he protested, his smooth face shining benignly. "Monsieur Théophile will do while we wait for better things."

"It ought to be Monseigneur," the girl replied, with a smile, "if merit always met with justice in this world. However, Monsieur Théophile, I know how true your words are, and I am only too conscious of my own lack of personal attractions either to count upon them as a means to commend myself to the public favor or to the court of his Royal Highness. But I think, and even

SERAPHICA

believe, that I have some slight gifts of a kind which might enable me in time, and with patience and under favor of your approval, to attain to some small degree of distinction in an art which you have helped to make illustrious."

The great Théophile smiled largely. It was evident that his greatness was not indifferent to the compliments even of the lowly—especially when the lowly happened to be lovely at the same time. In the age of the Regency loveliness need never dread to remain lowly if time should give opportunity. Who knows? The little inn-maid who stood so modestly before him might, if she came to Paris, happen to please the eye of the Duke de Richelieu, might even win a smile from the Regent himself; and then, of course, a new favorite would always have a grateful spot in her heart for the obliging manager who had helped her into the saddle of fame and fortune.

Still, as he said, there were plenty of pretty girls in the world, and a large share of them in France, and unless this particular pretty girl proved herself to have some gifts as well she might not be worth the pains of transportation to the capital. He seated himself heavily in a chair by the table and looked steadily at her.

"Can you do anything for me?" he said. And then, without allowing her to answer, he put up a hand of warning. "I don't want to hear any school recitation or anything of that sort. 'Lafontaine.' *Ho!* 'The Two Pigeons.' *Ho!* Do something for me yourself. I do not care what it is, grave or gay, brisk or serious, only improvise—create—show me that you have something in you of the imaginative faculty. Any parrot can learn a part—any monkey can ape the manners of a human being; only

SERAPHICA

a human being can be himself or herself for good or for evil. Be yourself for the next five minutes, playing whatever part you please; do not be nervous; do not be affected; do not be self-conscious; do not, above all, be silly, and, when you have done, I will tell you what I think of you."

For a few moments Seraphica looked at Master Hardi in silence, and then, much to that gentleman's astonishment, her beautiful eyes filled with tears.

"Monsieur," she said, tremulously, "you have the face of one who would protect the distressed, who would pity an unfortunate girl. I cannot act, I cannot pretend, but if I tell you the true reason why I am so anxious to get away from here I feel sure that you will pity and help me."

Here the Duchess approached Hardi, and held out a pair of trembling hands so pathetically that Hardi could not help but take them and even pat them in an effort to calm her evidently rising agitation.

"Trust me, my dear child," he said, paternally. "You are not the first person who has confided in me, nor will you, I expect, be the last."

Seraphica sunk gently at his feet, and looking into his face with a pair of eyes so beautiful, so pathetic, so innocent that Hardi was quite confounded, she began:

"You must know, honored sir, that I was left an orphan at the age of ten. My mother had been waiting-maid to a great lady, and having picked up some of the manners of her betters she did her best to impart them to me, and this fact, little as she could guess it, has helped on my misfortunes. I grew up under the care of a distant relation, who, as soon as I was big enough, apprenticed me to Adam Billaut as serving-maid. I had been here but a

SERAPHICA

year, monsieur," said Seraphica, pathetically, "when I attracted the attention of a well-to-do barrier guard a few years my senior. Monsieur, we saw each other and we loved."

Here Seraphica threw such a world of longing and pathos into her voice that Master Hardi felt quite uncomfortable. She resumed her story, with the tears running down her face:

"Unfortunately, I had also unwittingly attracted the notice of a certain nobleman—a duke, indeed, who had better be nameless. This duke, who sometimes came here with a pleasure-party, soon showed his wicked interest and pestered me with his loathsome attentions. His pursual of me was patent to every one, and so enraged my lover that I often implored him to have a care of what he said in case his words should be repeated to the duke. However, monsieur, all went well, and the day for our wedding had been fixed, when one evening, as I was strolling in yonder garden with my betrothed, who should meet us but the duke. He accosted me very freely, totally ignoring the presence of my intended husband. Drawing me to him, he pressed a kiss upon my unwilling lips, and asked me with great coarseness when I was coming up to Paris to visit him. I tore myself away from him, and told him that I was to be married in a fortnight, and should then be free from his persecutions. He laughed brutally, and answered me with so coarse a gibe, referring to certain imaginary seigneurial rights of his, that I burst into tears, and my poor, my unhappy, my beloved consort, overcome with rage, struck the wretch across the mouth. Before I could scream, before I could move, the duke had drawn his sword and thrust it through the body

SERAPHICA

of my lover so deeply that the point appeared through his back. My affianced bridegroom fell at my feet, and with a last look at me with his death-glazing eyes he died."

The girl here was seized with such a storm of weeping that she leaned her head down on Master Hardi's knee, and her body shook with grief. Master Hardi, who was endowed with a sympathetic heart, felt his own eyes grow misty at the sight of this young creature so cruelly, so barbarously treated by fortune. He gently stroked the bowed head, and with a somewhat husky voice bid her finish her story if she could. After a silent struggle for self-control, the girl lifted her head, and with her face gradually hardening into an expression almost ferocious, she continued:

"I will not try, honored sir, to describe my grief or horror. Suffice it to say that my violence was such as to alarm that villanous murderer himself, who hurried me into the house and tried to make me receive a large sum of money. This I threw in his face, promising myself that if ever I could get a chance for revenge the determination should not be wanting in me. All this took place a year ago. But not content with having forever ruined my happiness, the monster still pursues me with his fiendish attentions, and vows I shall one day be his. My only chance of safety is to escape from here, to find some other occupation for my life which would leave me less at his mercy. Pitying sir—for I see pity in your countenance—take me with you, I beseech you, and save me from the embraces of the murderer of my lover."

Master Hardi's emotional temperament was thoroughly roused at this most pitiful story. He rose, and helping

SERAPHICA

up the almost fainting girl, he deposited her into a chair, and, striding up and down the room, he swore with the most dreadful oaths that the duke in question was the greatest villain yet unhung.

"Poor, unhappy child," he vociferated, "I should be almost as great a scoundrel as he did I leave you in his power. I am the one hope left to you, and you shall not find me wanting in pity. But, alas! if I do as you wish, and add you to the Paris stage, this will be but to throw you in the way of this duke of yours, who is sure to be an assiduous play-goer. Poor child, poor child, how can I assist you in your affliction!"

Here the ready tears started to his eyes again at the sight of the girl, who was still sobbing periodically. He approached and drew from his pocket a capacious handkerchief, with which he was about tenderly to mop her eyes, when under his astonished gaze a brilliant smile lit up the eyes of the hitherto lachrymose Gillette, and she burst into peal after peal of the most delicious laughter. Master Hardi started back and stared at her helplessly, convinced that she had taken leave of her wits. His face only seemed to amuse the laughing damsel the more, but she managed to gasp out between her gusts of laughter:

"Well, Master Hardi, did I act well? Was I nervous? Was I affected? Above all, was I silly?"

With sparkling eyes and flushing cheeks Seraphica dropped into a chair, and surveyed her audience with a smile of triumph and amusement. Master Hardi was equal to the occasion. His face flamed with admiration, he beat his hands together as enthusiastically as a child at its first play, and he poured out voluble approbation. She was a born actress, he could see; she would certainly

SERAPHICA

make her fortune and, incidentally, his in the great city of pleasure. All she had to do was to take an Italian part and wear an Italian habit to deserve a place in his company and in the hearts of the Parisians. As to terms? Of course, she must not expect great things at first—and here the managerial voice grew calmer and the managerial manner more wary—for, after all, she had not yet proved her mettle on the actual stage and before the actual public. But still he would start fairly with her, and give her such sums as it was customary to give to an experienced actress who would be intrusted with the parts he intended to offer her.

Seraphica tried, with success, not to appear too indifferent to the subject of terms; pretended to think that after what he had said she was worth a great deal; was strong in her suggestion of a speedy rise in salary if her success in Paris proved immediate, and finally wound up by saying that there was one point upon which she insisted.

Master Hardi, looking fatherly, asked what that point might be. He suspected a romance, and he was right in his suspicion, for the answer did not compel his belief and did not happen to tell the truth.

"I have a brother," said Seraphica, sweetly, "and I cannot go to Paris without my brother."

XI

RENAUD FINDS EMPLOYMENT

M HARDI frowned a little. "Can your brother do anything?" he asked, doubtfully.

Seraphica laughed reassuringly. "I do not think, to tell the truth, he is as clever as I am," she said, with a little apologetic smile for her own self-praise; "but still I think something could be done with him. And that is he," she added, "standing in the garden." And going to the garden door, she opened it, and pointed through the open doorway to where Prince Renaud moved among the flowers.

At the moment Renaud's conduct was not such as to discredit him in the eyes of an appraising player. For the nonce his tranquillity of caste, his calm of habit, were abandoned, and the Prince of St. Pol was striding up and down the garden walks gesticulating in a most histrionic manner, striking the clinched fist of one hand into the open palm of the other, and, as was plain whenever he turned and showed his countenance, muttering angrily to himself. For in his thoughts the indignant Prince was facing his hated rival, and was telling him in the plainest of plain words what he thought of the man who could stoop to such conduct as would sully forever the fame of the Regent of France. Seraphica guessed his mind as

SERAPHICA

she watched his angry actions, and her pointing finger quivered with the laughter she found it so hard to restrain.

Master Hardi's gaze followed the direction of Seraphica's finger, and his large face showed some surprise and more suspicion.

"That your brother?" he questioned. "Why, the fellow is dressed like a gentleman."

"That," said Seraphica, glibly, resolved not to be at a loss to explain anything—"that is because my dear brother is a gentleman's gentleman, and is wearing a cast-off suit of his late master's, which, indeed, becomes him very well."

Master Hardi looked at her, stroking his chin, and observed dryly that it became him very well indeed. But why, he was curious to know, did her brother want to change his condition. Seraphica was instantly ready with a further explanation.

"My poor brother was a little too much the gentleman for his gentleman, and made too great a way in the graces of one of his master's flames. So his master dismissed him, and threatened to cut off his ears if he ever showed himself in Paris again. He was consulting with me about his position when you arrived."

Master Hardi still caressed his chin and scrutinized the countenance of Seraphica. She smiled at him so candidly that he was completely misled.

"If your brother," he said, "has any measure of your aptitude for the stage we may be able to do something with him. To be frank with you, this rallying of a company of masks is an experiment of mine, made at the instigation of a friend of his Royal Highness the Regent,

SERAPHICA

as a step in the direction of inducing his Royal Highness to permit the return of the real Italian players, who, as I dare say you know, have been for some time forbidden to appear in Paris."

Seraphica did not know, for news of such kind seldom travelled as far as Artois, where it would have found no market of curiosity. But her brief experience as a vagabond had already convinced her that it might often be wise to assume a knowledge which one did not possess. So she nodded in cheerful acquiescence, and Master Hardi went on with his argument.

"Now, I have been so busy with other matters that I have not yet been able to raise a complete company to represent the various masks, and if you insist upon your brother—"

"Nay," said Seraphica, slyly, "who am I to insist upon anything with so great a man as Monseigneur—I mean, as Master Hardi? But I am quite, quite sure that I could not go into the world without the companionship and protection of my dear brother."

Master Hardi looked at Seraphica very thoughtfully. The more he looked at her the more he was pleased by her looks, and the more her appearance attracted him the more he became conscious that admiration might very readily ripen into a warmer feeling. This inn-girl, whose beauty might well attract for her the favor of the great, might also gain the favor, in the first instance, of Master Hardi himself, to whom she could scarcely fail to be grateful for his fostering kindness. As for this brother of hers—he might possibly be her brother; he might also, and more probably, be her lover; but in either case, it could do no harm to gratify the girl's wish. If he were really

SERAPHICA

her brother, and were a sensible fellow, he might prove of great use as a cloak for the amours that Master Hardi was already planning for his ward. If he were only her lover, she would, if she were the girl of spirit he took her for, be very nimble in getting rid of him when bigger fish came into her net.

"Very well, my dear," he said, pinching her cheek affectionately—a liberty for which Seraphica longed to kick him—"if you must have your brother you must, for I vow I have taken such a fancy to you that I would not lose you for a bigger matter than this."

Seraphica caught Master Hardi's hands in hers, more to restrain them from further caresses which they seemed to threaten than from any serious gratitude for a kindness whose real instinct she was quite able to divine.

"How good you are! how great you are!" she cried, with enthusiasm. "My benefactor!" And she held tight to his fingers, which, as she knew, he struggled to release that he might be tickling her cheeks. "But I do not want him to accompany me in his present garb. Surely he is too finely dressed for a humble player!"

"Much too finely." Master Hardi agreed with her decisively, for he had no fancy to have his own splendor dimmed by the modish dignity of Renaud's attire. "But do not let that distress you. I am equal to most emergencies, as you will find out in time, my dear, and this one presents no sort of difficulty. I happen to have in my carriage yonder a suit of clothes which I bought at Compiègne, and which will serve our present purpose admirably. If you will inform your brother of his good-fortune, I will step outside and procure it."

Immediately Seraphica released the benevolent hands

SERAPHICA

of Master Hardi, who made an effort to pat her cheek anew, but her dexterity avoided the condescension. Then, as Master Hardi made with a noble stride for the inn door, Seraphica tripped light-foot into the garden, and called Prince Renaud to her side. And all this time a certain travelling-carriage was bearing a muffled serving-maid farther and farther from the Windmill inn; and all this time honest Adam Billaut slumbered up-stairs and dreamed of vineyards; and all this time, as good-fortune had it, no traveller came to clamor for rest and refreshment at the Windmill inn.

As Seraphica entered the garden Renaud heard her step and turned to meet her. She advanced to him beaming with satisfaction.

"Good news!" she cried, gleefully—"good news! Master Hardi is so pleased with me that he is willing to engage you in his wonderful company of Italian players."

Renaud did not seem so rejoiced as Seraphica, by her manner, pretended to expect him to be. "I am neither an Italian nor a player—" he began. But Seraphica deftly silenced him by laying her palm against his lips, and the palm was so soft and the hand so pretty that Renaud did not in the least resent a familiarity which was scarcely within the limits of Seraphica's supposed position.

"That does not matter in the least," Seraphica said, gently. "Nobody in Master Hardi's Italian company is Italian, because it seems that, for some reason or other, Italian players are not allowed to perform in Paris. I am not Italian, and I am not a player, but I can wear an Italian name, and so can you, and we are both going to be players, if you please." Then she said, in a low tone:

SERAPHICA

"Do not be obstinate. I am going to get you into Paris in disguise."

Renaud's eyes glowed gratitude at these words; and with no more ado he consented to follow Seraphica into the room, where they found Master Hardi awaiting them with a plump valise in his hand. Master Hardi, who was busy unbuckling the bag, looked up as the pair entered and eyed Renaud over thoughtfully, as one that was not to be deceived in his appraisal of mankind.

"You have got a pretty good figure for a player," he said, when he was satisfied that he had weighed this tiresome brother sufficiently long in his managerial balance. "I dare say we shall make something of you in time, if you happen to share any of your sister's talent, and if, above all, you stick to your business; for your sister gives me to understand that you have a way of falling into foolish love-scrapes." Here Renaud frowned, and here Seraphica smiled; but the great man, heedless alike of smile or frown, went on with his homily. "The great thing in all arts, but especially in our art, is a whole-souled devotion to its service. Let me remind you, young sir, that you cannot serve God and Mammon."

Seraphica was wellnigh bursting with suppressed mirth; Renaud was raging with an internal volcano; Master Hardi was serenely unconscious of the contrasting emotions he was fanning. He spoke again pompously.

"Your sister and I have agreed that your present habiliments are wholly unsuited to your coming occupation—let us hope that we may be able to say hereafter your coming vocation. I have, therefore, consented to lend you these garments."

As he spoke the great and excellent man plucked from

SERAPHICA

the now yawning mouth of the valise, and uplifted, for the admiration of his companions, a singular suit of clothes. It consisted of a large, loose, long jacket of white stuff that buttoned with enormous white buttons down the front, and a pair of very wide pantaloons of the same material. A liberal linen frill, a huge back mask with a nose-piece as assertive as the spout of a kettle, a soft hat of white felt, and a pair of white canvas shoes completed the costume which Master Hardi now spread before the eyes of the indignant Renaud, and cheerfully invited him to assume.

Renaud was for a moment on the point of bidding Master Hardi go to the devil with his gear, but Seraphica, who read his rash thought, stayed his rash words. She gave him a stern little glance and a stern little nod of the head, which reminded him that, after all, it might be wisest to take her advice and resign himself to this ridiculous imposition if he wanted to find himself again in Paris, and again at the feet of Madame de Phalaris. So he swallowed his choler, and strove to appear pleased when Master Hardi invited him, with what rapidity he pleased, to assume the honored garments of Pulcinella. The manager and Seraphica valeted him, a sullen, silent victim. Off went the mulberry-colored coat, off went the comely riding-boots, off went the gallant hat. Over the rest of his fine array the pair slipped the white jacket, lifted the white pantaloons. His feet were thrust into the white slippers, his hair was carefully huddled up under the flapping hat, and his aristocratic visage was muffled in the ugly vizard. As a disguise the transformation was most thoroughly effective. It would have been, indeed, hard for any one to recognize in that fantastic apparition, with its flowing

SERAPHICA

sleeves and flowing trousers and absurd black muzzle, the handsome and high-bred heir to the principality of St. Pol.

Seraphica gave a little scream of delight which the new-made Pulcinella responded to by a grin of annoyance, of which only the compression of the lips was visible under the black shield of the half-mask.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she said, running to him with a mirror in her hand, which she had caught up from the dresser, and thrusting it into his unwilling fist, "you do look a figure of fun! I should never have known you again, believe me!"

Then she dropped into a chair and leaned back in it, shaking with silent laughter, while Renaud scowled furiously at his hideous image in the glass, and Master Hardi proceeded to stuff the voluminous pockets of his new-made Pulcinella with printed handbills, setting forth the merits of Master Hardi's company in general and of Master Hardi in particular.

"Come," said Master Hardi, when he had finished this job, "come, to Paris. You"—to Seraphica—"shall ride in my carriage, and you"—to Renaud—"shall sit on the box-seat and distribute my handbills."

XII

TRIUMPHANT LAWYER

WHEN Monsieur Popelin de Secherat escorted his becloaked companion through the doorway of the Windmill inn and out into the diffused light of the afternoon he felt himself a happy man. Muffled and hooded as she was in the voluminous folds of the Vidame's military cloak, the triumphant lawyer could see nothing of his fair companion except the heels and toes of a pair of dainty riding-boots, in which indeed the lady appeared to move with no great pleasure; but at least the lawyer could note with satisfaction that no hint need be conveyed to the vagrant eye of a by-passer that underneath those scarlet folds the heiress to the duchy of Bapaume walked horribly masculine. As it happened, there was no passer-by, and the exultant de Secherat was able to escort his twittering convoy—for the veiled fair kept up all the time such a snuffling and a whimpering as might have softened the heart of a Mameluke—without observation to the chariot in the twist of the road, where the Vidame de Bethune sat enthroned.

The Vidame's jolly face was framed in the window, like the picture of a monstrous cabbage-rose, an honest vacuity of scarlet. When, however, he beheld the advance of de Secherat with the bemantled damsel in tow, his pursed

SERAPHICA

lips uttered a whistle, and he hopped out of the vehicle with portentous alacrity and held the door open for the hunted Duchess. On the box the confidential coachman stared stubbornly into vacancy. Not for him was there any knowledge of these Olympian happenings. Blubbering more faintly, the reluctant Duchess seemed urged by de Secherat to a slightly quicker activity. The Vidame saluted bluffly, the scarlet cloak and the shrinking figure it concealed were swallowed up in the cavern of the coach, and it was with a voice broken with the emotions of conquest and congratulation that de Secherat, ere he followed on the heels of the scarlet apparition, gave the coachman the order to retrace his route, and the solemn carriage moved slowly along the shining highway making for Artois.

Seldom, perhaps, has any box on wheels concealed so many conflicting hopes and fears, dreams and delusions, as that slow and solemn carriage. In his corner sat upright the Vidame de Bethune, apoplectic in his struggle to conquer his amusement at the adventure, to curb the imaginings of a somewhat skittish spirit, and to appear properly respectful to, and unobservant of, the pathetic personage opposite to him in the place of honor—a pyramid of scarlet cloth. "A merry devil in petticoats!" he chuckled to himself—"a merry devil in breeches!" And he wished that amiable fortune would pull apart those ruddy trappings and reveal the graces of her graciousness in unfamiliar wear. In other words, the Vidame was honestly anxious to look at the Duchess's legs.

In his corner de Secherat sat, nervously alert, his adust face unable to conceal the exhilaration of its owner, the air of pride that reflected, with a smile which almost de-

SERAPHICA

generated into a smirk, upon the ability with which he had run his naughty quarry to earth.

As for that quarry, as for that captive mantled in scarlet, she kept herself as still as the proverbial mouse, save only for those same sniffings and snivellings which had swayed her frame from the moment when she yielded herself to the custody of de Secherat. If her thoughts were busy, if her mind was bewildered, if her heart was at once perturbed and exalted by the keen edge of adventure and the dread of its consequence, she succeeded with sufficient discretion in keeping her agitation to herself. Hour succeeded hour in silence; the plodding horses slowly devoured the long leagues of white highway; the sun swam through serenity towards his bed in the west, and both the Vidame and his legal companion began to experience the pricks of appetite.

For a long time Monsieur de Secherat, who had the management of the matter in hand, kept silence concerning the hollowness of his body. It was not for him to speak of carnal things until such time as the Duchess should manifest her good pleasure to feed. The Vidame, on his part, kept silence too, in a sense, crushing such internal rumblings as the growth of famine provoked with lusty blows upon the drum of his body. It was not for him, neither, to suggest, in any other form, to the lady, his companion, that he stood in need of physical refreshment. As for the so-seeming Duchess, she squatted, hunched and huddled, in the corner of the carriage, with her legs tucked up beneath the flaps of the Vidame's mantle, and her visage hidden behind the rampart of the cloak's upturned collar; and nothing save an occasional shiver and an occasional sniff gave evidence to her

SERAPHICA

hungry companions that she was either awake or alive. At last, as they passed through a fairly prosperous village which boasted itself the possessor of a fairly prosperous inn, the emptiness of Monsieur de Secherat emboldened him to a breach of etiquette of which he had scarcely deemed himself capable.

"Highness," he whispered, as the carriage crawled over the cobbles and slowly moved past the alluring hostelry, "would your Highness care to partake of any refreshment to support you for the remainder of the journey?"

The only answer to an appeal which, it must be admitted, was made more for the sake of the appellant than the appellant, was a shuddering quiver of the muffled body and a shuddering shake of the hidden head. With a sigh of despair de Secherat resigned himself to his fate. He must needs fast till the next stage of their journey, where it was essential that they pass the night. Even if horses could be obtained for the continuance of their journey without a break, it was too much to ask of the sovereign lady of Bapaume that she should travel through the night in so relentless a fashion. For all she was a runaway, she was still Duchess of Bapaume, and had to be treated with the regard due to her rank. To the blissful reaching, therefore, of the last stage in that day's journey de Secherat looked forward with the keenest eagerness, licking his thin lips, and mentally thinking pictures of the delicacies which he hoped the inn might offer to the Duchess—and incidentally to himself and his companion.

As for the Vidame, he took the business as an old soldier should take his comfort: if he could not eat now, why, he

SERAPHICA

would eat later; and if drink were denied to him at this present, with what a deluge he would flush his gullet when the happy moment came for lifting can! None the less, he could not help considering the conduct of the Duchess not a little unreasonable, and he had in his mind some bluff, soldierly thoughts of the way in which he would handle the baggage and set matters to rights—if only the baggage did not happen to be the Duchess of Bapaume.

While he was thus reflecting, and at intervals futilely dozing, the summer dusk began slowly to deepen into the summer night. Now, whether it was that the day, which had been warm, had grown cooler, or that the Vidame, deprived of his cloak, was more sensitive to the vagaries of the atmosphere, certain it is that he experienced a sudden sense of chilliness which eventually asserted itself, in spite of his efforts at self-restraint, in a vociferous sneeze—a sneeze that rang out lustily in the narrow space of the carriage, and seemed to rattle with the reverberations of a petty thunder against its glasses.

There was nothing especially surprising in such a sneeze; it was merely a lusty sneeze, as became the lusty sneezer; a man of such a full habit of body as the Vidame de Bethune would naturally be rather vehement, not to say violent, in any physical explosions. Yet the result of that sneeze was certainly surprising alike to the Vidame and to Monsieur de Secherat. From forth the folds of the military cloak came the faint sound of a muffled voice that bleated the words, "God bless you." Now here was a familiar formula, or a version of a familiar formula, common enough on rustic lips, on humble lips. Coming

SERAPHICA

from the lips of the Duchess de Bapaume it seemed, to say the very least, eccentric and unexpected.

The Vidame glanced in his amazement at de Secherat, to read upon the lawyer's face a surprise as great as that revealed by his own rubicund countenance. Secherat bent towards the muffled figure opposite to him, and addressed it in tones of respectful astonishment.

"What was your Highness pleased to observe?" he questioned. But he got no answer to his question; only the folds of the Vidame's scarlet cloak seemed to be drawn more tightly about the shrinking body, plucked more closely over the retiring face. The lawyer looked at the soldier and shook his head, implying by the gesture and by the expression of his face that there was little hope of pacifying the Duchess in her present temper, and that there was nothing for it but patience. As patience was one of the Vidame's old-soldierly virtues, he acquiesced in the lawyer's conclusion cheerfully enough, though not so completely as not to look forward with pleasing anticipations to the nearing prospects of supper and a bed.

He had not long to wait. In a little while the carriage began to clatter again over cobbles; on either hand lights flashed from the windows of a village street. De Secherat sat erect with a brisk air of satisfaction, and the carriage came to a halt before the doorway of an inn. De Secherat leaned forward and whispered to the Vidame a request that he would alight and make arrangements for the accommodation of the party, while he, on his side, would devote himself to the none too easy task of persuading the captured Duchess to make the best of a disagreeable business.

Straightway out skipped the Vidame, delighted to

SERAPHICA

stretch his limbs, and immediately devoted himself to the sufficiently easy task of impressing the host with a sense of his visitors' importance. The distinguished appearance of the Vidame, the ducal armorials upon the panels of the carriage, the solid magnificence of the horses, had already produced their proper effect, and the Vidame had but to ask to have all the resources of the inn—which were not, indeed, very great—at his service. He demanded, and got, the best rooms; he set things in train for the preparation of as liberal and pleasing a meal as the inn's larder permitted; he was soon deep in conference with the inn-keeper on the question of vintages, and thoroughly happy in his work.

In the mean time the position of the lawyer was less felicitous. Still cooped in the darkness of the carriage, he was employing all his arts of eloquence to persuade his prisoner to alight for refreshment and for rest. Not a word could he get for answer—only a renewal of the torrential weeping which had been characteristic of the first stage of the captivity. The scarlet bundle shook and choked and sobbed and shivered in a way that began gravely to distress de Secherat; for though he was seriously annoyed with the Duchess for her impish caprice, still she was the Duchess, and it was grievous to observe so great a lady reduced to such an extremity of tears. At last, when the lawyer found that nothing would induce the Duchess to utter a syllable, he bethought him of a method by which he might at least gain some inkling of her wishes.

“Dear and revered lady”—thus he adjured her—“do not distress yourself, and necessarily your humble servant, by too intemperate a surrender to vexation. We are all hu-

SERAPHICA

man; we must all eat and sleep, even at moments when we feel most dissatisfied with the turn of our affairs. Even your Highness cannot be set free from these incidental needs. Let me, therefore, entreat you to consent to enter this hostelry, there to repair the ravages that excess of emotion must have effected upon your Highness's well-being. But do not imagine that we wish to oppress you by our company. Perhaps you would prefer to be alone for the remainder of the evening?"

This suggestion was met by such an immediate and vehement agitation of the hidden head that de Secherat began to feel, for the first time, that he was making some progress with his delicate negotiations.

"And to have such wine and viands as you may require sent to you to your room?" he continued, laboring the advantage he had gained by establishing some method of communication with the Duchess, albeit on her side a dumb one. Again the concealed head nodded emphatically. Monsieur de Secherat gave a sigh of satisfaction, and made to quit the carriage. But he paused to deliver a final charge to the Duchess, whose sobbing had now somewhat abated, thanks, no doubt, to the promised solitude.

"Highness," he said, "I can understand, I can sympathize with your condition. To-morrow you will be at home again, to-morrow this escapade will be as if it had never been. Very few know of it, and they will forget to remember. But till to-morrow I trust that your Highness will recollect that you are in our charge, and that you will signify your princely promise not to take any advantage of a leniency which we are anxious to extend."

Again the hidden head bent, and the somewhat ex-

SERAPHICA

hausted de Secherat only too gladly accepted the inclination as a signal that the little Duchess agreed to his terms. He skipped out of the carriage very nimbly for a man of his years, and extended a lean hand to assist the Duchess to descend. But the figure swaddled in scarlet, without availing itself of the courtesy of the lawyer, bundled somewhat awkwardly out of the vehicle, and stood for a moment in the mixed light of the inn door a pathetic figure, evidently uncertain what to do next. De Secherat came to his lady's rescue. "Let me guide your Highness," he whispered; and, taking the assumed Duchess respectfully by the elbow nearest to him, he guided her stumbling footsteps over the threshold and into the dim hall. Here the Vidame stood awaiting them, and evidently expecting that at last the treat was to be afforded to him of beholding the dainty Duchess's outlines flagrantly betrayed in the habit of a man. His first disappointment was to behold before him the huddle of ruddy cloth to which he had grown accustomed during the tedious drive; his second was to learn from the whispering lips of de Secherat that the Duchess required quiet and isolation. The lawyer, therefore, demanded to be conducted at once to the room set apart for the Duchess, and, preceded by the inwardly indignant Vidame, he aided his fair companion to ascend the creaking stairs which led to the sleeping-apartments. All that the few spectators in the inn hall saw was the solicitude of a pair of elderly gentlemen to assist towards his bed a younger companion whose health required that he should be enveloped in a military cloak from the top of his head to the heels of his boots.

The Duchess's room was duly reached. De Secherat, on the indication of the Vidame that the goal was touched,

SERAPHICA

opened the door, and respectfully requested the Duchess to enter. He promised, paternally, that her Highness should promptly be served with food and drink; he warned her, also paternally, that he thought it well for them to resume their journey at an early hour in the morning; he hinted darkly at a further gratification in store for her; and then, after wishing her good-night in tones the most benevolent, he withdrew, closing the bedroom door upon the silent figure in scarlet, and taking with him the Vidame towards the promised supper. De Secherat took it that he had the Duchess's promise to accept the situation and make no attempt to escape, but he was none the less relieved to note that the Duchess's bedroom was at a sufficiently deterring height from the ground, and that the stairway to its entrance led directly from the hall of the inn, which hall was commanded by the private room that the Vidame had succeeded in obtaining for the use of his friend and himself.

He gave immediate orders that a proper supply of provisions should be carried to the room occupied by the Duchess, and he added instructions that its occupant was to be in no way disturbed or worried by any importunities of service. The meal was to be placed in the room; when that was done the servant was immediately to withdraw. Those were his commands, and, having given them, and feeling confident that they would be obeyed, de Secherat, a load of anxiety off his troubled mind, made ready to enjoy himself by sharing a good repast with his friend, the Vidame, who, for his part, professed himself as hungry as a hunter, and declared his ability to eat a whole ox and to empty a whole tun.

The worthy pair drew their chairs to a fairly well-

SERAPHICA

spread table, and began the business, so pleasing to hungry men, of filling their stomachs. For a while they munched in silence; then the Vidame, with a magnificent gesture, filled two goblets with wine, and, lifting one of them in his hand, looked his table-partner significantly in the eyes. De Secherat caught at his glass and raised it in his turn. A whimsical smile played about the lips of the soldier, and he laid a restraining hand upon his friend's wrist to prevent him from carrying his beaker to his lips.

"I have a toast to propose," he declared, his jolly voice quivering with merriment—"a toast appropriate to the adventure and its heroine. Here is to a merry devil in breeches!"

Monsieur de Secherat grinned and chuckled for a moment, twisting his lean face whimsically. Then he quickly caught back his gravity. A duchess was a duchess, however her legs might be garmented. So it was with a rigid face that he sipped his wine, and there was the shadow of a frown upon his countenance when he addressed the Vidame.

"Friend," he protested, "the unfortunate adventure is at an end, and I think it ill becomes either of us to make a jest of what might have proved far from a laughing matter. Let us forget the breeches, Vidame; for the love of mercy, let us forget the breeches!"

The lawyer's manner was emphatic, the manner of a man that was not to be gainsaid.

"As you please," the Vidame acquiesced, with something of a wry smile, for his spirit was easily titillated by skittish fancies, and he had been turning in his mind not a few light-hearted jests on a ticklish theme—"as

SERAPHICA

you please. Let us bury the breeches with military honors."

He rose, as he spoke, with a full bumper in his hand, eying de Secherat the while with a roguish gravity which the lawyer faced with an air of dignified sternness.

"To the memory of the breeches," the soldier said; "the banished breeches, the vanished breeches."

As he spoke he drained his glass. Then, as he set down the empty vessel and resumed his seat, a new idea seemed to come to him, for he suddenly addressed de Secherat vehemently, and the tone of his voice was more jocose than ever, while his hearer frowned reprovingly, taking it for granted that the Vidame was going to say something which he ought not to say.

"It is all very well," he chuckled, "to talk of the vanished, banished breeches. You forget that we have another day's journey before us, when the breeches will be more in evidence than ever, for I suppose the gracious little lady does not propose to sit wrapped in my mantle until we reach Bapaume."

De Secherat slowly filled himself a glass of wine, and slowly swallowed it, in large, comfortable gulps, with his most judicial expression on his face—the kind of expression that made the beholder usually feel as if he were about at once to be ordered to the galleys or the axe.

"My good friend," said the lawyer, when he had set down his emptied glass, "I forget nothing. I am all prevision, all preparation, all readiness. Have the goodness to cast your glance towards yonder corner of the room," and the lawyer aimed an index-finger at an ample valise which had been lately brought into the room by the landlord, and which now reposed on the floor of the apartment.

SERAPHICA

The Vidame, following the direction indicated by the lawyer's gesture, stared at the valise. "Well," he said, "what then?"

"In that portmanteau," Secherat announced, with the quiet dignity of one who feels that he is about to triumph—"in that portmanteau I have packed—or, rather, have caused to be packed—certain articles of feminine apparel which will enable her Highness to discard her male attire, and to appear before us in her proper habiliments. I set off in too great a hurry to take thought for such a matter, but on my way I remembered, and sent back a confidential message to the mistress of the robes for a parcel of woman's wear to attend one here, where, if I caught her Highness, I knew we must break the journey on our return."

De Secherat's smile of satisfaction deepened as he spoke, but it has to be admitted that the expression on the Vidame's face was one of decided disappointment. He had been counting upon a survey, on the morrow, of the pretty Duchess in her male attire, and his discontent was patent. But he could not, of course, allow it to overflow into his speech, so what he said, though it was spoken very half-heartedly, was a stammering encomium on his companion's foresight. The lawyer accepted the compliment with a fine smile, which showed that he did not altogether misappreciate the feelings of his friend.

"I shall convey that portmanteau," said de Secherat, deliberately, tasting, as it were, the while, the dissatisfaction portrayed on the Vidame's face, "at once to the door of her Highness's apartment and leave it there, after informing her of its contents. I imagine from her embarrassment of to-day that she will be very grateful to me for the pro-

SERAPHICA

vision, and that the act may do something to mitigate the not unnatural irritation which she feels at having been balked in her frolic.

He rose as he spoke, and, going towards the valise, lifted it from the floor. He decisively declined two successive offers made to him by the Vidame: the first being that he, the Vidame, should carry the bag for him; the second, that at least de Secherat would accept the Vidame's aid in bearing the burden to the bedroom floor. It was a somewhat awkward but not especially heavy affair, and de Secherat made his way with it nimbly enough to the stairs, which he ascended earnestly, clinging to the balustrade with one hand while with the other he lugged the valise that bumped against his lean calves.

The Vidame sat somewhat sulkily in his place, watching, with a lowering face, the departure of his friend until de Secherat was out of sight. Then he filled himself another glass of wine, drained it at a draught, and decided to seek consolation for his disappointment in the suavity of tobacco. Summoning the landlord, he obtained a clean pipe. From a flapped pocket of his white coat he produced a weather-beaten, ancient tobacco-box. He filled the bowl very carefully, pressing the shreds comfortably home, and then made several very deliberate, but, for a time, not very successful, attempts to light the pipe at the nearest candle. The fact was that the Vidame had drunk a very considerable quantity, even for him, of a wine which, in accordance with his commands, was really very old, full, strong, and heady, and, though he felt all the better for his potations, neither his hands nor his feet were as steady as he would have expected them to be upon parade. After a little while, however, he managed to

SERAPHICA

effect a sufficiently steady union of bowl with flame to bring about the desired conflagration. The fine, blue smoke soared merrily from the crucible; the fine, gray smoke poured freely from the Vidame's parted lips; the Vidame gave a sigh of satisfaction, and decided that he would take the air and taste the sweetness of the evening. So, clapping his hat somewhat awry on his periwig, he lurched, with an air of titubating majesty, to the inn door and ushered himself into the presence of the night, a vinous votary of her coolness and her calm.

Meanwhile Monsieur de Secherat, having climbed the stairs and reached his goal, was very well content to let the portmanteau slip from his tired grasp before the door of the beleaguered lady. He tapped discreetly at the panel, and was rewarded by hearing a little grunt which he, no doubt correctly, interpreted as an interrogation. In a clear whisper through the key-hole he first inquired if her Highness had received the repast he had ordered. Taking a low gurgle for an affirmation, he then proceeded to inform his captive that he had deposited a bag containing the essential garments of her sex on the threshold for her to indue at her leisure in the morning. Accepting a kind of sniff as an intimation that his message had been received and understood, de Secherat then respectfully wished her Highness a good-night, and made his way back to the room where he had left the Vidame, but where now the Vidame was not to be seen. As, however, he had left a small quantity of wine in the bottle, his absence was by so much the less to be regretted; and, indeed, the lawyer was not disinclined for a little solitary reflection upon the successes of the day. Filling himself a glass of wine, he stretched his thin legs before him, and composed him-

SERAPHICA

self for the enjoyment of his vintage and the serious consideration of all that had happened since his hurried departure from Bapaume in pursuit of the fugitive Duchess.

But as the result of his enterprise had removed disquiet, and as the liquor in his glass was rich in a lulling persuasiveness, the excellent lawyer found that his reflections tended more and more to drift through a state of dreamy contemplation into the kingdom of dreams itself. At first he struggled against this inclination, trying his best to keep his thoughts judicially alert and keen, but, in a while, the effort proved too much for a tired mind in a tired body. The spirit of sleep whispered her delicious spells more insistently; the tension of de Secherat's muscles relaxed with the tension of de Secherat's thoughts; somnolence seemed to close in upon him like a fog; a few feeble efforts to keep his lids lifted against the drifting mist proved as futile as they were feeble. Within a few minutes of his entering the room, within a few seconds of his emptying his glass, de Secherat was fast asleep, with his pendant hands trailing beside his chair and his pendant chin propped upon his chest. De Secherat slept, de Secherat snored, de Secherat dreamed disturbing dreams, the result of hurried travel and troubled thoughts. So his pendant head wagged uneasily and his pendant fingers twitched.

XIII

A PEEP, AND ITS SEQUEL

IN the mean time the Vidame, wooing the night, had wandered for a while heedlessly, and, indeed, somewhat vaguely, up and down on the high-road in front of the inn, smoking portentously. In the course of his divagations he was tempted by the aspect of a shady lane, or alley, that debouched from the great thoroughfare and ran alongside of the inn. Feeling the need of quiet, of isolation, the Vidame allowed his none too certain feet to carry him into this pathway, which, when pursued, conducted him, something to his surprise, into the courtyard and back offices of the inn. The place was, indeed, a very haven of tranquillity. By the fitful moonlight the Vidame could discern a couple of countryside carts that trailed their shafts like warriors laying down their arms, a ladder hitched into its hooks along a garden wall, a fowl-house through whose wirework might be guessed, rather than seen, the dim forms of drowsing birds, and the inevitable manure-heap, with a pitchfork sticking out of it defiantly.

None of these things attracted the Vidame, none of these things would have tempted him to delay. But his first intention of immediately retracing his steps was suddenly arrested by a patch of light in the black back of the inn,

SERAPHICA

the light that came from an uncurtained window in the wall some two stories up. Across the illuminated space flitted for a moment the figure of a girl, with a gleam of bare arms and a hint of white-linen—a teasing, pleasing vision that was gone as swiftly as it came.

Now, whether the distemper which the wine had effected in the Vidame's fancy had been rendered the fiercer by the change from the heavy room into the coolness of the night, or had already proved so vehement as altogether to overbear reason, it were hard to decide. Certainly, afterwards, the Vidame was unable to decide, when he endeavored to face the dilemma. At least it must be admitted that he conducted himself for a brief period of time like a man who, as it was to be hoped, could not be accounted responsible for his actions. For as soon as the Vidame saw that lighted window and the image that flitted for an instant across the yellow space, he guessed that he was gazing upon the casement of the room allotted to the Duchess of Bapaume, and he guessed, further, that his gaze embraced it at a moment when the said Duchess was engaged upon the business of shifting from her male attire into the feminine garments provided for her by the thoughtfulness of de Secherat. Knowing, or assuming so much, there was obviously no need whatever for the Vidame to linger in the vicinity; nay, rather, a fine sense of discretion would have suggested to him that though as the window in question was several feet above his head there was no possible chance of his overseeing a process intended for the strictest privacy, his immediate duty was to retire and relieve the little Duchess from even so distant and so unknown an observation.

But the wine, the wild adventure, and his own private

SERAPHICA

reflections and desires, had quickened in the Vidame's breast a quiescent devil of naughtiness. The fancies of the camp, the manners of the canteen, overcrowded what little reason his tippling had left undrenched, and only a Gaulish spirit of misrule jiggled in his brain-pan. Forgetting not merely his own position and dignity, but the position and dignity of the person he was about to offend, the Vidame proceeded to the perpetration of an amazing piece of folly which he incoherently justified to himself as a set-off against his recent disappointment, which still rankled in his warrior's bosom. Going to where the ladder lay against the garden wall, he lifted it from its supports, and, carrying it with more steadiness than might have been expected from his Bacchic condition, he succeeded in propping it fairly firm against the side of the inn, just below the illuminated window, to whose sill it easily reached.

All this manœuvre was effected quite quickly and quite unnoticed. The inn, save for that one space of yellow flame, seemed as dusk and hush as the night. The only accident was that the Vidame broke his pipe, which, though long smoked out, he still carried mechanically between his finger and thumb. But what was the loss of a yard of clay in the course of so gallant an adventure? The bowl went this way, the stem went that way, and the Vidame himself, staggering under the weight of his ladder, went the third and worst way.

Up the ladder the Vidame began to climb, breathing hard now, and flushed to a dull plum-color. He had been a roisterer in his day—plumed himself, indeed, upon being a roisterer still—and had climbed steep steps ere now in the services of Venus and of Mars. For the moment his

SERAPHICA

confused brain could not be quite sure whether he was ascending to a balcony for an assignation or scaling the walls of some fortress after the well-won trenches. Then he recalled his drifting wits: he was only going to steal a peep at a naughty girl changing from her man's habit into her woman's coats; it would be just a peep and no more, with no harm done to the impish Duchess, and much good done to the jolly Vidame. The little lady would never know that she had been spied upon, and the jovial soldier would add one more to a gallery of gallant memories.

The Vidame de Bethune did not reason very logically as he blundered and lumbered up his ladder. Such thoughts as these came later when he tried to cleanse his conscience. Now he just felt in a drunken humor for what he believed to be a frolic, and was incapable of realizing the astonishing folly, impudence, and insolence of his action. Up his ladder he scuffled, rung by rung, beginning to wheeze a little as he neared the second story, but still licking his lips, as it were, at the prospect which awaited him. Now the lighted window was only a few feet above his head; now it was only a few inches away from him; now his forehead was opposite the sill, and in a moment more the panting, perspiring Vidame was freely peeping into the candle-lit room.

At the first glance he was a little disappointed. He had come somewhat late upon the scene; the major part of the metamorphosis had been accomplished, and his ignoble curiosity was no further rewarded than by the sight of a girl in petticoat and stays, who, with her back turned to her invader, was folding some articles of male attire upon the bed. As the Vidame stared, wishing he had come earlier, and still feasting upon the pretty dis-

SERAPHICA

play of bare arms and shoulders, the girl turned round and moved towards the dressing-table, which stood near to the window, showing, as she did so, her face to the as yet unobserved watcher.

It was little less than a wonder that the Vidame did not relinquish his hold on the ladder and fall headlong to the ground, so staggered were his wits, so paralyzed his members, by the effect of what he beheld; for the face of the half-dressed girl was not the face of the Duchess. It was a pretty face in its way—so much the reeling senses of the soldier swiftly admitted—but it was pretty, not with the prettiness of a great lady, but with the prettiness, rather, of a peasant. To whatever order its comeliness might belong, it was emphatically not the face of the Duchess of Bapaume—did not even resemble in any marked manner the face of the Duchess of Bapaume. This girl was dark-haired and dark-eyed, but beyond this all resemblance ceased.

While the Vidame, almost sobered by the astonishment of his discovery, was trying to reduce his whirling thoughts to order, and to decide what were best to do in the face of the amazing fact now flung upon him, the girl, still quite unaware of his presence, came to the toilet-table. She was carrying on her arm a flowered gown of rich brocade, on which her eyes were fixed in intense admiration, and she fingered the soft stuff lovingly with her free hand. When she was in front of the mirror she extended the gown on both her arms, and lifted it over her head. As her face emerged from the folds that fell all around her, the Vidame, who lingered, hoping against hope that he had been the victim of some hallucination brought about by drink, saw once again, plainly and beyond ques-

SERAPHICA

tion, that the young woman who was so busy in exchanging the garments of a man for the garments of her sex was not the Duchess of Bapaume, but quite another person.

But this time it was not merely the Vidame who saw the woman; the woman also saw the Vidame. When she rose, as it were, to the surface, after plunging her pretty head into the depths of the brocade, her face was turned towards the window, and outside that window, framed in the square of the panes, she beheld the black mass of a man's head. She gave a little squeal of alarm—she was taken too much aback to be fully alarmed and to scream accordingly—and moved hurriedly forward towards the window.

As she did so the Vidame moved as hurriedly away from it. His fuddled brain had cleared and cooled sufficiently to allow him to make a guess at the position of affairs, and to form some sort of opinion as to his own action in the matter. Duty summoned him at once to hurry to de Secherat's side, and to thunder in his ears the news of how he had been duped. Pleasure hinted to him that he might come to terms with the fair unknown, and, by agreeing to keep her secret until the arrival of the party at Bapaume, obtain from her certain concessions to gallantry. But the sight of the girl's terrified face and the sound of the girl's shriek, which his distempered fancy magnified to a volume far beyond its actual compass, decided him to play the soldier rather than the rake, and to obey the voice of duty. Firm in this resolve, if somewhat infirm in his movements, the Vidame began to descend his ladder with all the rapidity possible to him, while above him a window opened, and a woman's head leaned out, silent, into the night.

SERAPHICA

The Vidame could never quite remember afterwards how he got down the ladder without doing himself any personal injury, how he found his way out of the court-yard and down the lane, or how he dashed, gasping and tragic, into the presence of the still slumbering de Secherat. His first point of clear remembrance was of shaking the sleeping lawyer violently by the shoulder, and shrieking to him to wake up. De Secherat, who was seldom a heavy sleeper, was for once hard to arouse, thanks to the fatigues and vexations of the past perturbing hours; but the violence of the Vidame's actions and the violence of the Vidame's cries at last recalled him to consciousness in the very middle of a truly mirific snore. The pale-faced lawyer, with his wig tipped incongruously over one eye, stared, in all the alarm inevitable to the rudely awakened, at the blazing face of the Vidame, whose rebellious tongue refused to frame articulate speech, but only spluttered indistinguishable sounds of fear and fury.

"What is the matter, in the devil's name?" gasped de Secherat, recovering some degree of self-possession as he realized where he was, and, struggling into a more upright position, made some effort to adjust his wig.

Thus adjured, the Vidame found words at last. "She is not the Duchess!" he shouted. "She is not the Duchess at all!"

De Secherat blinked at him; de Secherat tried to clear his throat, which was feeling painfully parched after his potations. "Who is not the Duchess?" he snarled, trying to think what the words meant, and why the Vidame uttered them so ominously.

"The baggage whom we carried here, wrapped in my mantle, is not the Duchess of Bapaume," the Vidame

SERAPHICA

vociferated. "I do not know who the hussy is, but she is not the Duchess Seraphical!"

De Secherat leaped to his feet in an instant. There was at least clear meaning in these words, whatever measure of truth they might contain. "What do you mean?" he cried. "How do you know?"

Though the Vidame was soberer than he had been, he was still in a sufficiently vinous condition to assume an air of owl-like gravity as de Secherat thus questioned him.

"Never mind how I know," he said, thickly; "the point is that I do know. The woman in yonder room, the woman who has been with us all day, blubbering, is not the Duchess of Bapaume."

De Secherat, wide awake now, and all alert, gripped the Vidame fiercely by the arm and shook him. The lawyer was a little man, the soldier a big one. The result looked like a terrier tugging at a boar-hound.

"Is this some drunken muddle," he cried, "or do you believe that you are speaking the truth?"

The Vidame tried to release himself from the clasp of the lawyer's claw. He also tried to look dignified. He failed in both enterprises.

"Of course I am speaking the truth," he hiccupped. "I tell you again that the girl who is changing her clothes up-stairs is not the Duchess—is not a bit like the Duchess."

De Secherat glared for a moment steadily into the Vidame's flushed face and turgid eyes. Instantly convinced that his companion, for whatever reason, was trying to speak the truth, he relinquished his hold upon his arm, and, turning, proceeded to climb the stairs, three steps at a time, with the alacrity of a cat. The Vidame was, for a moment, hot to follow his example and his footsteps,

SERAPHICA

but some dim instinct of military tactics pricked his bemused intellect. The girl, whoever she was—the enemy, so to speak—was safe enough on that side. She could not possibly evade the ascending de Secherat. Let it be his part, as a skilful strategist, to intercept the enemy in the rear. With this purpose struggling in his mind against the fumes of liquor, he once more plunged into the night, and staggered as rapidly as he could along the highway towards the lane that led to the back of the inn and the court-yard.

In the mean time de Secherat, having scaled the stairs with amazing celerity, found himself at the door of the room in which, as he believed, he had immured the Duchess. There was a gleam of light between the wood-work and the floor, the sight of which somehow reassured him, but he lost no time in tapping loudly against a panel. "Your Highness! your Highness!" he called, in a loud voice; and when he got no answer, he repeated his cry again in a shriller key, while his knuckles rattled a veritable tattoo upon the door. "Your Highness!" he repeated, "your Highness!" And then continued: "I have urgent need to speak with you! I must speak with you—see you—at once!" But his clamor remained unanswered, and though he pressed his eager face against the wood-work, he could hear no sound whatever within the room.

XIV

ESCAPE

WHILE de Secherat is beating at the door and the Vidame is speeding towards the court-yard, let us consider a little the position of the pseudo-Duchess, the sham Seraphica. In spite of her terror at the false position in which she found herself so whimsically placed, Gillette was inclined to congratulate herself not a little upon her skill in impersonating the absent Duchess. Her ambition to be an actress and play great parts thus suddenly realized, she had endeavored to make the most of her opportunity, and in consequence overdid her impersonation very grotesquely. If de Secherat had not been so entirely convinced that he had captured the vagrant; if the Vidame had been a little more familiar with the character of Seraphica—whom, indeed, he knew very slightly—the imposition could scarcely have lasted as long as it did.

But Gillette, after she had exhausted her direst fury of simulated grief, and after the fountain of her tears had run dry, found that her safest course was to keep absolutely silent—a course that, as we have seen, she persevered in for the major part of her journey. Her only serious blunder was when she so far forgot her assumed dignity as to salute the Vidame's sneeze with a popular and homely

SERAPHICA

benediction; but even this blunder, while it had puzzled her warders, had not fluttered their suspicions. Now, in the immediately safe if temporary harborage of the inn, with a good supper inside her, and the welcome chance afforded her of a change back into women's clothes, Gillette's spirits began to rise to their habitual buoyancy.

She was not at her ease in breeches. She felt in the pit of her heart that she would have a better chance either to escape or to plead her cause in petticoats. It was, therefore, with alacrity that Gillette had availed herself of the contents of Monsieur de Secherat's portmanteau; and as she shifted from the pinching habiliments of man to the delicious freedom of woman's wear, she was revolving in her mind whether she should play out the comedy of imposture to the end, or should seek to effect her escape in the quiet of the night, and trust to chance to make her way back in safety to the Windmill. Now it was while she was considering these possibilities, and while she was fitting the brocaded gown to her trim figure, that she suddenly became aware of a face outside her window—a face that was eagerly peering in, a face that seemed, as well as she could distinguish it, to be the face of the more portly of her two travelling companions.

Gillette's first feeling was one of fear, and she gave a little scream. Her second feeling was one of affronted modesty. How long had that staring face been there, and what would Porte-Panache say if he knew? This question prompted her to utter a second little scream, and as she did so the peeping face disappeared from the window. Gillette stood still for a breathing-space, her hands pressed against her breasts; then, being at the core a courageous girl, she made a rush for the casement, flung

SERAPHICA

back the lattice, and popped her pretty head out into the night. Instantly the mystery was solved. The top of a ladder rested against the window-sill; in the distant darkness she could hear the sound of stumbling feet running she knew not whither.

Gillette did not stop to ask herself what all this meant. Her simple mind preferred to deal with facts rather than with possibilities, and the great fact, patent to her eyes and mind, was that a ladder stood at her disposal, attractive as the ladder of Jacob to an angel who desired to descend. Below her there, in the cool obscurity, lay freedom, lay safety, lay the path to Porte-Panache, whom she never loved, never missed, so much as at that moment.

Hurriedly Gillette finished fastening the dress over her shoulders; then, gathering her skirts about her knees, she straddled the sill, and planted a foot on the top rung of the ladder. It was firm to her tread, it was steady to her weight; its solidity stiffened her resolution to make the attempt. If the man who had peeped upon her was, indeed, one of her jailers, he would no doubt hasten to tell his companion of his discovery, and so, whether she stayed or went, the fat would be in the fire. Under these conditions she decided to go, and in another instant she was slipping down the ladder as swiftly as her nimble feet could trip.

Once in the deserted court-yard, she fumbled her way to a gate, and, following a lane, found herself in the open highway, that was dimly lighted by a moon that swam through cloudy skies. She knew the direction of Paris, and, holding her coats high, that they might not trammel her twinkling legs, she made ready to run as hopefully as if the great city were no more than a league or so away. It

SERAPHICA

was perhaps a minute or so later that de Secherat came to knock noisily, and then to listen anxiously at the door, behind which he had, as he believed, securely caged his bird.

When de Secherat found that his knocking gained him no response, and that he could not, for all his listening, hear any sound in the room, he began to feel alarm, and he called out in a loud voice that unless the Duchess opened the door to him instantly, he would, on the compulsion of necessity, make so bold as to break down the partition between him and her Highness. This threat being left unanswered, the door remaining fast, and no sound coming from within, de Secherat repeated his menace a second time, and then, remembering the triple summons customary before ordering troops to fire upon a hostile mob, yet again a third time.

Finding his third summons as little regarded as his first, he decided to take more desperate efforts to gain an entrance. If the lawyer was not very strong, the door was not very solid, nor its bolt very firmly set in the wood. Bracing himself for a great effort, de Secherat drew back across the passage, and then, taking a short run, brought his shoulder, supported by such weight as his body could boast, against the partition. It yielded visibly at the first assault; de Secherat could see a thread of light between the jamb and the panels, could hear a creaking which told him that the bolt was beginning to give. Once more he made an ineffectual appeal for peaceable admittance, and, receiving no answer, made a second, and this time wholly successful, charge against the offending portal. The inner bolt was wrenched from its holdings, and the angry lawyer, clinging to the reeling door like Icarus to his

SERAPHICA

wheel, found himself staggering, hot and breathless and crumpled, into a deserted room.

The room was lighted by a single candle, which, however, afforded sufficient illumination to let the lawyer see that some man's clothes were cast upon the bed, that a man's boots and a man's sword lay upon the floor, that the window was open, and that he was the only human being in the room. He rushed to the casement, and, craning his head into the night, caught sight of the ladder resting against the sill. De Secherat was habitually a man of temperate language, but when he saw the ladder he began to swear horribly—horribly, that is, for the gravest and most famous lawyer in all Artois. Then, without a moment's hesitation, he tilted his lean person out of the window and onto the ladder, and made his descent to the court-yard with such rapidity as only an extreme of rage could have kindled in him. The next moment he found himself in the arms of the Vidame, who came rushing into the yard with equal velocity from an opposite direction. For a few seconds the two men clawed wildly at each other, bewildered, and endeavoring to extricate themselves from an unnecessary embrace. Finally disentangled, they drew apart, and thereupon the lawyer began to upbraid his companion bitterly.

"The Duchess has escaped," he said, "and it is all your fault with your cursed curiosity."

"The Duchess has not escaped," the Vidame retorted, hotly. "I tell you that woman is not the Duchess, and it is thanks to my cursed curiosity, as you call it, that we have discovered the trick."

"You are drunk," said de Secherat, angrily, "and incapable of telling one woman from another. If you had

SERAPHICA

not been drunk you would not have left the ladder for her Highness to escape by."

The Vidame, feeling rather guilty, tried, as most people try, to push it by with bluster.

"I am not drunk," he said, and lurched as he said it. "What is more, I have never been so drunk in my life as not to be able to tell one woman from another, and that woman was not Madame Seraphica."

De Secherat was plainly staggered. The Vidame was not too tipsy to speak clearly, probably not too tipsy to see clearly. Could there be any truth in his mad tale? Seraphica was plainly capable of any mischief, any mystification; but how, in Heaven's name, could she have accomplished such an imposture?

"We must find her at once!" he screamed. "She cannot have gone far!" Turning, he scrambled up the ladder again, closely followed by the Vidame, and, dashing through the deserted room, pelted down the stairs like a whirlwind, shouting loudly for the landlord as he ran. The Vidame at his heels, and emulous of his swiftness, ran too, but ran not so well. His condition was not fitting for swift descents of high-pitched stairways, and ere he was half-way down he tripped, snatched unavailingly at the balustrade, and rolled for the rest of his journey, swearing prodigiously, until he landed on his back in the hall, where he sprawled, still voluble of oaths. By this time the whole inn was in an uproar, doors opening, voices calling, lights flaming, feet trampling, women screaming, dogs barking, cats mewing, horses neighing, asses braying—a welter of uncouth clamors breaking up the quiet of the night.

By the time that the Vidame had cursed himself from

SERAPHICA

a lying to a sitting posture this orchestra was in full blast; by the time that he had sworn himself to his feet, the landlord, partially clad in his shirt and breeches, and holding a hatchet in his hand, had burst into the room expecting to find—he knew not what: at best an unexpected brawl between his guests, at worst an incursion of murderous plunderers. Behind him discreetly rallied the inn-hands rudely armed with pitchforks, and behind these again, perched and shivered on the stairway, the women folk in their shifts.

It took the raging de Secherat some time to explain to the scarcely less angry landlord what had happened, or rather what the lawyer's wit, ready even in peril, professed to have happened. The person in their custody, according to his new-made tale, was a young lady who had escaped from school to join an objectionable suitor in Paris. Intercepted in her flight, she had again contrived to escape, and must be sought for and found at once. De Secherat fanned the flagging sympathies, and allayed the vexation of his hearers by promising a reward of fifty gold crowns to whomever found the errant damsel.

Thus stimulated, the landlord and his lads became all activity, as ready now to abandon their beds as they had been wroth at being compelled to quit them. Rude torches of resinous wood steeped in pitch were hurriedly produced and lighted, and in a few minutes a singular procession of flambeau-bearers streamed out of the inn and along the Paris road.

But already Gillette had accomplished the first and perhaps the most difficult stage in her escape. She had reached the high-road and made ready to push for Paris when she heard the heavy tread and the wheezing breath

SERAPHICA

of the now somewhat exhausted Vidame, and knew that one of her dreaded custodians was coming in her direction. Cunningly she ran a little way up the high-road away from her pursuer, and away from Paris; cunningly she crouched in the shadow of the trees that warded the way, until she felt sure that the Vidame had turned into the lane. Then she nimbly retraced her steps, padded cautiously past the inn door, and stood for a moment exultant on the path to Paris. As for the Vidame, he pursued his course to the inn yard with what grotesque result we know.

XV

A HOMING BIRD

WHEN Gillette found herself at liberty on the wide highway, she lost no time in putting as great a distance as might be between herself and the pursuit which she knew was probable, and felt to be inevitable. The night was darker than it had been; heavy clouds were sweeping over the face of the heavens and obscuring the moonlight, often for long intervals at a time, but the darkness was far from displeasing to the runaway, who found in it a convenient mantle for her flight. Even in the obscurity the road lay fairly plain before her, broad, not ill-made, and at that hour of the evening she knew that it would be practically deserted.

After a last glance at the inn, from which, as yet, no noise arose to announce discovery or to threaten pursuit, she gathered up her skirts as high as her knees, and started to cover the ground before her at a steady run. Her peasant stock stood her in good stead: her wind was sound, her limbs sturdy; and though she had no special training for a race, she scudded along very nimbly and very swiftly into the darkness. Her first desire was to put herself out of the reach of those two travelling companions, whom, through the course of the previous day, she had managed to fool so admirably. Indeed, as she

SERAPHICA

reflected upon her success in this adventure, self-congratulation almost lifted her to the pinnacle of self-conceit, and persuaded her that she had proved herself to be, what she had always believed herself to be, a great actress. Common-sense reminded her that all she had done was to keep quiet, hidden by the cloak, and to sob and whimper at intervals; but still, so her vanity urged, or perhaps, indeed, her common-sense assured her, to have done so much under such ticklish conditions would not be given to every adventurer.

Her second desire was to get back, as speedily and as safely as she might, to the neighborhood of Paris and the shelter of the Windmill inn. She knew very well that the highway at night was not an ideal place for a pretty girl to find herself in, but Gillette was a sufficiently courageous lass; she was not at all afraid of familiar dangers, although she had been very much afraid, indeed, of the very much unfamiliar imbroglio from which she had just succeeded in extricating herself.

With these two wishes in her mind, she ran steadily along the road for some considerable distance, until the gradual slope upward of the ground and the sudden failing of her breath compelled her to slacken speed a little. As she paused she looked over her shoulder, and far away in the distance behind her she saw now moving points of light starring the blackness, and she fancied that her quick ears could catch the far-off sound of calling voices. Instantly she guessed that the pursuit she feared had begun, and the sense that her recovered liberty was menaced gave her new energy to ascend the slope at a brisk trot. After rising for some distance the road suddenly dipped, and down the decline Gillette went at full speed till she

SERAPHICA

reached the level road again, and still kept running on, panting but determined.

The hill that now lay behind her shut out all sight or sound of her pursuers—a fact which encouraged her to struggle on, until at last she was compelled for very weariness of body and scarcity of breath to sit down for a while and rest by the roadside. She knew it would soon be dawn, and that when it was light it would be at once easier and more perilous for her to continue her journey: easier, because she could see her way, and might, if she pleased, deviate into by-paths, avoiding thus the obvious track of the high-road; more perilous, in that it revealed to any possible depredator the unfamiliar sight of a comely maid, in the garments of a great lady, wandering by herself on the king's highway. However, Gillette was fairly confident that she could take care of herself pretty well in any ordinary emergency. She was not, moreover, without resources. Apart from the diamond ring, which she had hung round her neck on a piece of ribbon, she had also command of a comfortable sum of money, which she had been wise enough to transfer from the pocket of Seraphica's breeches to the pocket of Seraphica's gown before trusting her fortunes to the ladder and the night.

When she was sufficiently rested, and had recovered her breath, she rose and renewed her journey, taking it more leisurely now, walking for the most part at a brisk and steady pace, only occasionally increasing her gait to a run when the road was especially level, or when any distant sound recalled to her the unlikely possibility of a nearing pursuit. In this way the darkness of the night gradually lessened and lightened into the gray of the dawn,

SERAPHICA

and full, plain day still saw Gillette trudging valiantly forward with her silken skirts uplifted.

Now was the time, Gillette thought, for the dangers and adventures which she partly dreaded and partly desired, but which, however, she was not destined to experience. Fortune seemed propitious to her flight, ready to make easy her return. A friendly countryman driving a cart-load of cabbages overtook her as she plodded on, tired but dogged, and consented readily enough to her request for a lift. He believed, or seemed to believe, the story which Gillette hurriedly invented, and no less hurriedly told him, to account for her presence in that place in that attire, and he carried her for a considerable stage of her pilgrimage—carried her, indeed, to one of those villages through which she had passed under such different conditions on the previous evening. Here, thanks to the friendly countryman's advice and her own proof of ability to pay, she succeeded in obtaining the services of another countryman with another cart, who agreed for a stipulated sum to convey her as far as the nearest town, where in all probability she would be able to obtain a seat on a coach going to Paris.

Everything turned out very tamely and amiably. Countryman number two was as good-natured as countryman number one, and as credulous of whatever story Gillette was pleased to tell him. In due course of time she did obtain a seat on a Paris-bound coach, and towards evening she found herself, with no additional adventures added to the score of the original adventure, standing on the threshold of the Windmill inn.

XVI

THE LAWYER'S DELAY

FOR some time the torches gleamed and flickered along the lately deserted road, that now was bustling with hurrying human forms and noisy with shouting human voices. Over every hedge the flame of the flambeaux poured, into every ditch eager seekers groped; every shed that stood near the roadside was anxiously investigated. But in consequence of these precautions the pace of the seekers was as slow as the pace of the sought had been swift, and when more than an hour had elapsed the party had not proceeded far, and had found no sign of the fugitive. For near another hour the excited lawyer persisted in following up what he believed, and indeed rightly believed, to be the trail, encouraging, as he did so, the now dwindling zeal of his companions by promises of liberal payment for their time and their ruined slumbers, in addition to the reward he had already offered for the capture of the prize.

But when the better part of this other hour had been wasted in a wholly futile search, it became plain to everybody concerned, with the exception of the indomitable de Secherat, that the hope of finding the girl that night was a vain one. To no one was this more apparent than to the Vidame, who was heartily tired of the whole business.

SERAPHICA

Muddled by his potations, vexed at his disappointment, and irritated by the persistency of de Secherat, he was, at first furtively and at last emphatically, in favor of the discontinuance of a hopeless search. Even de Secherat himself had to admit that somehow or other their prisoner had eluded them, and he now asserted that the only thing to be done, and the immediate thing to be done, was to put the horses to the carriage and make with all speed to Paris.

Here, however, a general chorus of protestation greeted him. It was impossible, the coachman who had joined the search-party declared, for the horses to be employed again so soon. They were already unduly tired from yesterday's heavy work, and rest was essential to them if they were not to break down altogether on the next journey. The people of the inn were equally decisive in declaring that no other horses were obtainable in the neighborhood, and in the face of a general consensus of hostile opinion, de Secherat was compelled to succumb and agree to the Vidame's suggestion of a few hours' rest before renewing the pursuit in the morning. Reluctantly, therefore, the irate and rueful lawyer agreed to return with the Vidame to the inn, where, after consoling the feelings of the disturbed household by sundry disbursements, he consented to be persuaded to retire to rest, on the understanding that all should be ready for his departure at a very early hour.

Alas, for the irony that attends upon human enterprises! Everything was ready for departure at an early hour of the next morning—everything, that is to say, with the exception of de Secherat himself. The excitements of the past days, the unfamiliar fatigues, the unwholesome

SERAPHICA

irritations, and the still more unwholesome disappointment, had told upon a constitution that was never too vigorous. In a word, Monsieur Popelin de Secherat, at the time fixed for setting out, was quite too unwell to depart. His fiery obstinacy, his obdurate determination, urged him to continue his journey at all hazards, but it was plain to the honest and now really distressed Vidame that the state of his companion's health made the attempt impossible. He earnestly argued with the lawyer, who, after two or three feeble and unsuccessful efforts to leave his bed, was obliged to admit the cogency of the soldier's reasoning, and for the moment to surrender at discretion.

It must be recorded to his credit that in this crisis the Vidame de Bethune rose to the occasion, and showed himself something of a strategist and more of a nurse. It was he who soothed de Secherat's fretful mind by devices calculated to minimize the effects of the misfortune of the lawyer's illness, and the unavoidable delay in the finding of the Duchess. It was he who, when the landlord introduced a local apothecary, who immediately proposed to bleed the pure-blooded lawyer, took a firm hand with the medicine-man, and ejected him, none too gently, from the chamber and from the inn. By the Vidame's advice a letter was despatched by a sure hand to the Marquis de Flercy at Bapaume, the said letter dated from Paris, and assuring him that all was well, but that for the convenience of the Duchess, who had been found in the best of health and spirits, it was agreed to delay for some days in the capital before returning to Artois. Another missive was also despatched to de Secherat's confidential clerk, urging him to proceed with all speed and secrecy to the village where de Secherat was now lying on a sick-bed.

SERAPHICA

Him de Secherat proposed to despatch to Paris on the track of the missing Duchess.

The Vidame himself, finding the landlord a sensible fellow enough, and quite capable of looking after the sick man, would have been willing to proceed to Paris alone to pursue the search for the Duchess, but on this point de Secherat was firm in refusal. The lawyer did not feel at all confident in the Vidame's powers of diplomacy or persuasion—supposing, indeed, he was fortunate enough to be successful in finding the Duchess; and in order not to increase the fever which now troubled de Secherat, the Vidame yielded and remained by his side. As de Secherat argued querulously, the Duchess had now been away so long that a day or two more would scarcely matter. She must have got to Paris long since if, as the Vidame persisted in asserting, the woman who had escaped from the inn bedroom was not the Duchess. It was now plain to de Secherat that he had somehow been tricked at the Windmill inn, that an impostor had been cleverly palmed off upon him for Seraphica by Seraphica, and that Seraphica must have been in the capital for several hours before the deceit had been discovered by the deceived. Under the conditions, the best thing to do was to try and get well as soon as possible, and, to accomplish this, de Secherat contrived to curb his native impatience and to obey the rough but simple and effective doctoring of his military friend.

The confidential clerk duly arrived, travelling post-haste; was hurriedly put by de Secherat in possession of the main points of the strange affair; and was instructed to retrace carefully every step of the journey from the Windmill inn, making inquiries as he did so as to whether

SERAPHICA

a young lady in a brocade gown had been seen travelling Parisward in the course of a certain night and morning. When he arrived in Paris the clerk was to pursue his inquiries there, always, however, with the utmost tact and discretion. This arranged, and the clerk despatched upon his way, de Secherat resigned himself to his uncomfortable position. The soldier proved so good a physician that in a very few days he got the lawyer comfortably out of bed, and in another thirty-six hours, no news having in the meanwhile been received from the confidential clerk, the Vidame and the lawyer were again driving together in the direction of Paris.

XVII

THE PLUCKED PEACOCK

MASTER HARDI, who made a kind of family of his actors, and gave them board and bed as part of their salary, lodged his players at an ancient hostelry that stood out of the beaten way in Versailles, and that rejoiced or mourned—as it might please you to interpret the fancy—in the Sign of the Plucked Peacock. Versailles, or as much of Versailles as was aware of the existence of the auberge du Paon Déplumé, had grown used to the whimsicality of the ensign, and such travellers as exceeding need to live cheaply carried to the inn door cared little for the enigmatic panel. So long as they were not plucked, they were heedless of the eccentricity of the denuded peacock.

But for Seraphica, in her zest for the unfamiliar, in her delight in her license, the grotesque sign-board was one merry note the more in the music of her adventure. If she had laughed heartily when she heard the name of her destined shelter, she laughed more lustily yet when she paused upon the threshold and stared up at the swinging timber. On the wood the painter had represented the argus-eyed bird of Juno under an aspect at once unfamiliar and ridiculous. With a touch whose firmness accentuated the grim humor of his theme, he portrayed the imperial

SERAPHICA

bird as naked of his splendors as any gosling stripped for the spit, and staring with a rueful expression at the wealth of gold-fringed and purple-eyed plumage that lay about his claws or that floated in the background like so many rays away from his ignobled body.

Seraphica plied Master Hardi with a fire of questions about this ironical image, and Master Hardi, anxious to oblige a young woman whom he was learning to take very seriously, explored his memory for her pleasure. The effigy dated, so it appeared, from the zenith of the last reign, when Monsieur Poquelin de Molière was busy, with the aid of his incomparable company, in diverting the silver-gilt fœdium of the Sun-King.

Some player, who could not only paint his face, but had the mania to paint the visible world about him, was driven to "munch the mad cow" at the dismal little inn that lay so near to, and was so far from, the gayety and the gluttony and the gallantry of the court. Deep in trivial debt as a man may drown in a puddle, our distressed painter-player proposed to his host, as many a fellow in like case has done, to paint him a sign in truck for a liquidated bill. The landlord mused, grunted, reflected that a full-colored sign was a tangible asset, and that sending a peniless devil to jail would be profitless revenge, and, having reflected, consented.

Debtor and creditor shook hands. Then the painter, in self-scarifying irony, gibbeted his ambition and his misery in an allegory. The plucked peacock was, as it were, the symbol of his present case; the glorious floating feathers that made so opulent a halo for the naked bird derided his withered dreams of fame. The landlord, tickled by his debtor's wit, and delighted by the bright

SERAPHICA

colors of his sign, not only passed the sponge of oblivion over the painter's score, but gave him a few silver pieces to boot and sent him on his way after a full meal.

Seraphica was curious to learn the later fate of the humorist, but here Master Hardi could not befriend her. So she laughed her way into the dingy inn, and laughed her way up the rickety stairs to the room that Master Hardi had provided for her. She had insisted on being given a room to herself, and Master Hardi, keenly alive to her likely value, had yielded, if reluctantly, to her stipulation. He had no passion for lavishing money upon the comfort of his company; the shelter of a roof and the surety of plain victuals were, to his mind, ample and benevolent provision. But this girl with the laughing eyes, this girl with the laughing lips, this child-woman with the gifts of beauty, of wit, of insolence, was of other stuff than the raw recruits he was used to handle. A room to herself Seraphica demanded, and a room to herself Seraphica had.

It was not a very wonderful room, when all was said and done, although Master Hardi talked of it as if it were the bedchamber of one of the Regent's favorites. It was high up, it was small, it was shabby; it looked down upon a narrow street and round upon an engirdlement of roofs. But it looked up to a bright-blue sky; the morning sun kissed its lattice; sparrows bragged and chattered in the eaves; there was a flower in the pot upon the window-sill; the walls and floor was clean, and so was the coarse linen of the bed. Rough as it was, and raw as it was, it was as welcome and as precious to Seraphica as a great lady's bedchamber in a palace. Seraphica was a great lady; Seraphica was familiar with apartments in palaces,

SERAPHICA

This petty box in a paltry hostel was charming to her, with a charm denied to ceilings that glowed with gold and color, to walls that flowed with noble tapestry; for this room meant liberty, this room meant adventure, this room meant a devil-may-care independence which made the blood tingle and uplifted the spirit. Seraphica sat on the edge of the bed and clapped her hands, and drummed her heels upon the floor in jolly enjoyment of her fortune. Bapaume was a prison; this garret represented freedom.

Master Hardi had informed Seraphica that there would be an ordinary meal served below-stairs within a few minutes, at which—though he did not propose himself to grace the table with his presence—she would be able to make the acquaintance of certain of her fellow-players. He announced, with much solemnity, that he would return to the Plucked Peacock later in the evening, in order to make his assembled company aware of his further intentions. Having said this, and having, with a great air of wisdom, recommended Seraphica to be assiduous in application to her profession, Master Hardi withdrew—after an embrace sought and denied—and left his recruit to her reflections, which were merry enough.

Certainly she had travelled a long way and tasted many changes since she set out from Bapaume. It seemed years rather than hours and days since she had ridden through the night from Artois hoping for much, but never daring, never dreaming, to hope for such fun as she had already found in her enterprise. For the moment the thing that most amused her was her recent entry into Paris in Master Hardi's coach, with Renaud, Prince of St. Pol—Renaud, who was niched somewhere in this very inn at this moment—seated on the box in the garb of

SERAPHICA

Pulcinella, and distributing handbills. She laughed till the tears came into her eyes at the memory, and while she was laughing a bell rang, which summoned her, as she guessed, to supper and the society of her new companions.

XVIII

A CRY OF PLAYERS

WHEN Seraphica entered the common room of the Plucked Peacock she found a sufficiently singular company assembled. Three women in somewhat faded finery were seated upon a bench in a window that overlooked the dismal little garden of the inn. About them were gathered a number of men, whose attire was quite as shabby and quite as gaudy as that of their feminine comrades. At the farthest end of the room she could discern the form of Renaud, sitting apart from the others, a huddled, grumpy figure of discontent.

Seraphica laughed softly to herself as she beheld him. This was not how the enamoured gentleman had hoped to approach the object of his passion. Yet, as Seraphica reflected, he ought to seem better pleased, as, if it had not been for this chance and her aptness, he would probably have been by this time in the Bastile. But if she was amused by the dejected isolation of the worshipper of Madame de Phalaris, her diversion was not lessened by the aspect of those that fate had given to her to be her playfellows upon the stage of the great and only Théophilus Hardi.

On Seraphica's entrance the company that had been all bunched together, confabulating about the sulky per-

SERAPHICA

sonage who sat so stiffly apart, and speculating as to the appearance of Master Hardi's new woman, resolved itself from a solid group into its individual atoms. The men fell away from the settee, and, as it were, unmasked the ladies who were enthroned thereon, and those ladies, as well as their attendant gentlemen, fixed Seraphica with a steady stare which might well have embarrassed a novice. But a duchess of Bapaume, even if she had been of a more timid disposition than Seraphica, would have been inured to the gaze of strangers, and among the failings attributed to Seraphica timidity was never included. So she met the many eyes of the players with perfect coolness, scrutinizing with composure each face in turn of the assembled mummers, and forming her estimate of each character with the swiftness and the shrewdness habitual to her.

"Good-evening, friends," she said, cheerfully, giving a gracious little nod as she spoke. "Am I the last of the company?"

A man with a face like parchment, and narrow, malicious eyes—a man who could surely never have looked young, and who very well might never look old—detached himself from the cluster by the settee, and, coming a little forward, swept her a somewhat extravagant reverence.

"Madame," he declared, "you are indeed in every sense the last of the company, the last to join our ranks, the last to grace our table. To you, who are last in both these capacities of fellow-player and fellow-feeder, let me be the first to offer the most companionable welcome."

He ended as he had begun, with fantastic flourishes of his hands, with fantastic movements of his legs. But all the while his face remained malign and his eyes belied his

SERAPHICA

words. Before Seraphica could say anything in response, he had again begun to speak.

"May we hope that you will prove a more amiable member of our little fellowship than some people choose to make themselves."

As he spoke he glanced acidly at the corner where Renaud sat apart musing in gloom.

"As to that," Seraphica answered, cheerfully, "I can assure you that I am not in the least particular as to the company I keep, and I can get on with almost anybody in one way or another. If people are pleasant to me I am pleasant to them, and if they are unpleasant, why, I suppose I can squeeze a lemon, too."

"A shrewd answer," said the malign-faced man, with a wry smile, for he had confidently expected to disconcert Seraphica for the amusement of his companions, and was himself somewhat discomfited by her composure. "As I am here to do the honors in Master Hardi's absence, let me present to you your comrades." He turned to the sofa and saluted its occupants with a florid wave of the hand. "These lovelinesses," he said, "are our Zerbine, our Coraline, our Celimène. This exquisite is our Leander," and he patted the shoulder of a weedy gentleman with a mincing air of gallantry, who was trying with no great skill to be at once assiduous to the player-women and to ogle the new-comer. "This buck"—and he playfully prodded the sides of a stout, red-faced man whose nose was a living hymn to Bacchus—"is our Tartaglia, our tun of mirth. For myself, I am Spavento, and very much at your service."

So he spoke, naming himself and his comrades with the names of the Comedy of Masks as Master Hardi ordered,

SERAPHICA

and bowed extravagantly when he had made an end. The ladies tittered, the men grinned. Seraphica thought them all rather silly and ill-natured, but concluded that they might mend on better knowledge. So she nodded pleasantly to each of the party in turn, and then suddenly remembering who she was, and realizing how servile the troupe of mimes would become if they shared her secret, she had much ado to keep from laughing in their faces. The whole party seemed a little dashed by her non-chalance, and in consequence uncertain what to make of her. The ladies somewhat awkwardly shifted their position so as to afford Seraphica a space on their sofa, a place which Seraphica instantly accepted. She found herself seated between Coraline, who was elderly, and Zerbine, at whose side Celimène was sitting. The men stood in a row before them, Spavento still smiling with that good-humor of his which was more sinister than open hate, Tartaglia grinning like a Limousin cat, and the lovely, the lovable Leander, in a languishing attitude, launching killing glances at the three young women, but especially, when he thought he could do so undetected of the others, at the newest comer.

"My dear," said Coraline, laying a very dirty hand on Seraphica's knee, "I hear that this is your novitiate in the great profession."

Seraphica admitted that this was so. The lady sighed.

"Ah, my dear," she said, "you will find that you are on the threshold of many disappointments. To you at this moment the life of the theatre is all rose-color, but you will find by-and-by that it has plenty of gray clouds."

Seraphica, looking from the snuffy Coraline to the bibulous Tartaglia, and from the imitation gallant to the

SERAPHICA

painted ladies on the sofa, laughed inwardly at the thought of any pinkness of tint illuminating this dingy business. Had she been really Gillette, she might have been impressed by the malice of Spavento, the languors of Leander, and the fascinations of Zerbine and Celimène. But being a sharp-witted, sharp-eyed young woman, she saw them exactly as they were, and was not—being a true citizenness of the world—inclined to like them any the less because of her knowledge. The men amused her more than they pleased her, but she felt a kind of liking for the two younger women. In the first place, they were really pretty, and Seraphica liked all pretty things—kittens, pictures, images, or minxes; in the next, they seemed good-humored creatures enough behind the mask of their not unnatural hostility to a new-comer, and such a new-comer, to the narrow compass of their sodality.

Seraphica responded, truthfully enough, that she was not so stage-struck as to be unaware of the cares and crosses that lay in her career. She seasoned this confession with sundry well-rubbed saws about taking the rough with the smooth, and other like profundities which produced a very good effect upon her hearers. She expressed, moreover, her readiness to be guided by the example of those of her own age and the advice of her juniors, and as she spoke she saluted Coraline respectfully and looked with admiration at her fair companions. As neither of these latter were less than a decade older than Seraphica, and as Coraline disowned the some three lustres further, this piece of diplomacy had the happiest effect in softening the asperities of the ladies' temperaments, and from this time onward the relations of the womenkind of Master Hardi's company promised to be

SERAPHICA

amicable. As for the men, they were so distracted between the desire to be more than friends with the new recruit, and the wish not to appear so desirous in the eyes of their earlier friends, that they showed to no great advantage. They vied with one another in the effort to be epigrammatic, to be gallant, dashing, captivating; they vied and were embarrassed, and failed to shine in spite of their effrontery of battered players.

Meanwhile, in his corner, Renaud still sat and sulked, the burlesque Achilles of a cry of mountebanks. He raged at his situation: the enforced buffoon among buffoons, the pupil of an inn's serving-maid, the skulker in borrowed plumes. He cursed the Regent for his currish spirit, which compelled him, a St. Pol of Artois, to play the zany thus when he had hoped and proposed to ride in all the pride of amorous knighthood into Paris and the lists of love. He had compelled his fellow-mummers to leave him in peace by the roughness of his tongue, which could be Flemish with a vengeance when necessary or unnecessary, and by a scarcely veiled roughness of carriage—also Flemish—which made it plain that he was ready and willing to back surly words with shrewd strokes.

The result of his ungracious bearing was that the players left him alone, and contented themselves with indirect sneers and vague gibes for which he could not with any show of reason call them to account. But while he sat apart and scowled, he watched with some amazement the ease with which Gillette—for so he called her—glided into the good graces of her company, and so, seeming careless and debonair, set all at ease and merry. He put this down, satisfactorily enough, to her common stock and origin. She was of like clay with the players, this inn-

SERAPHICA

maid, and could range herself to their ways. It was not to be expected that a St. Pol could so unbend, and yet, as he saw Seraphica on the sofa between the mollified women and faced by the admiring men, he almost wished that in his case the unexpected had come to pass, and that it could have been facile for a St. Pol to mingle at ease with his inferiors.

While he was in these thoughts and affairs, at this stage the people of the inn entered the room and proceeded to pay the materials for a meal on the long table that ran the length of the chamber. Straightway the players bestirred themselves to take their places, with loud proclamations of appetite. Spavento, who acted as a kind of marshal of the ceremonies, found a place of honor for Seraphica at the head of the table between Coraline and himself, thus managing by this manœuvre to pay a compliment to the new-comer, and to cut her off from immediate proximity to any other male among the players. But Seraphica, before she took her seat, had a duty to fulfil. She ran across the room to where Renaud sat apart, and, placing herself by his side, began in a low and respectful voice to conjure him very earnestly to be a little more gracious to his society and more pliant to his circumstances.

"Let me entreat you, Monseigneur," she whispered, "to be a thought more genial with these people. They are by no means bad company if you meet them in the right spirit, which, indeed, is for the most part true of all companies on this planet. Make the best of necessity, and remember that they do not know you are a prince of St. Pol, but believe you to be no better blood and breeding than belongs to my brother. However much the effort may cost you to be amiable to these players, I pray you

SERAPHICA

make it, if not for my sake, who have provided this pathway to your love, then for your own, that you may attain your purpose with the least discomfort or discredit to yourself."

Thus adjured, Renaud, feeling he scarcely knew why, vaguely ashamed of himself, consented to rise and to be conducted by Seraphica to the common table. There, still holding him by the hand, she harangued the expectant and amused fraternity.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she began, and then with a pretty smile she corrected herself and began anew: "Friends, let me present to your consideration and in-trust to your generosity my brother. It may be that on his first appearance among you he has not endeared himself to you by the show of that open-handed, open-hearted good-fellowship which is, as I have been led to believe, characteristic of the greatest art and the greatest artists in the world."

At this point Seraphica was interrupted by the tumultuous applause of her audience. The women clapped their hands; the men banged their knife-handles upon the board; Seraphica pretended to look embarrassed, and poor Renaud was ungallant enough to wish his so-called sister at the other end of the world and the whole gang of players in some convenient jail. But Seraphica, waiting until the tumult of approval had died away, resumed the thread of her eloquence.

"If, as I say, my brother has not seemed to appreciate to the full the privilege which he now enjoys of being made one of your number, you must not for a moment allow yourselves to think that his outward seeming has any correspondence with his inward thoughts. It is only shy-

SERAPHICA

ness at finding himself so unexpectedly and so fortunately in such illustrious society that has overpowered his naturally timid and shrinking nature, and has tempted him, as it tempts all such rustic spirits, to conceal the sweet kernel of satisfaction under the husk of indifference. Ladies, gentlemen, sisters, brothers, take to your hearts my brother, your brother, and welcome the trembling recruit whose highest ambition it is and always will be to prove himself worthy of your comradeship, and able to follow, however distantly, your distinguished, your brilliant example."

There be those to whom no flattery, however gross, is unlovely, and Master Hardi's somewhat ragged regiment swallowed Seraphica's glib phrases as joyously as school-boys swallow tarts. Anew they drummed and clapped their content, and when again they were silent the looks of the whole company were directed upon Renaud, from whom they obviously expected some words on his own account.

"Say something, silly," Seraphica whispered, audibly.

And thus encouraged, Renaud, governing his irritation, blurted out that he was happy to agree to everything that his sister had said for him so much better than he could hope to say it for himself. The easily appeased players accepted this assurance readily enough, and in a few moments more Renaud found himself seated between Zerbine and Celimène, who were both well aware that the new-comer was a good-looking fellow. Put on his mettle by the companionship of women, who certainly were pretty and who certainly were ready to be agreeable, Renaud forced himself to be agreeable on his side, and soon found that the way to make himself so lay in the paying of extravagant compliments to his fair companions.

SERAPHICA

The path of flattery, once entered upon, is not difficult to pursue, and in a little while Renaud was on as good terms with the two ladies as Seraphica already was with the whole company. In consequence, the meal was merry enough. If the viands were simple, if the wine was thin, all present brought good appetite to their consumption. Jokes were cracked, toasts proposed and drunk, arguments that seemed to be brilliant were eloquently sustained as to the merits of this player and that dramatic poet; in a word, the banquet went as pleasantly as if it had been a better one.

After the feast the men fell to playing cards, with the exception of Renaud, who pleaded a need to write, and, procuring himself pen and paper, sat apart in a corner and prepared to draught a letter to his ladylove. The women withdrew to their sofa, where in whispers the conversation became after awhile remarkably free. Seraphica was widely read, for her youth, and broadly minded—in no wise ignorant, if stubbornly innocent; but even her resolute composure and borrowed knowledge of the world was not a little staggered by the conversation of her new friends. These professed at first a genial scepticism as to the new recruit's purity, which it took Seraphica some pains to dispel; but when they were, or at least good-humoredly professed to be, convinced by the earnestness of her assurances, Coraline, that now played the duennas and such like, commended her highly for her reserve and forethought, protesting that she was a clever jade, and would reap a rich reward hereafter for her temperance in the past. To all this Seraphica listened, too curious not to be amused, too wise to be highly surprised, and the more unlike she felt herself to be and

SERAPHICA

ever to continue to her frank companions, who made no secret of their amours and experiences, the less hostile she felt to creatures whose frailties seemed rather due to the exigencies of a hard life than to any innate depravity. Indeed, they all seemed willing to admit that had they been so fortunate as to be born wealthy they would have been inclined to decorum as much as any others. After awhile, however, Seraphica found the monotony of the conversation not a little fatiguing, and she was heartily glad when it was interrupted by the door opening and the appearance of Master Hardi.

On the entry of the great man all the company rose respectfully to their feet with the single exception of Renaud, who sat at his writing heedless of the presence until Seraphica ran to his side and recalled him to a sense of his duty. Master Hardi carried in his hand a quantity of manuscript and a sheaf of cards. The manuscript represented the various parts he had to distribute; the cards were tickets of admission to the space set apart in the gardens of Versailles for Master Hardi's theatre. The manager dealt out his dole of parts and cards to each of the players, bidding them to be at the garden theatre at ten o'clock next morning. For Renaud there was as yet no part, only a card. To Seraphica Master Hardi intrusted a heavily written manuscript which he told her contained a very fine part, which if she could do justice to it, as he honestly believed she could, would help her to make her fortune. It was not a stock piece, he explained; it was the work of an amateur whose name he was forbidden to disclose. It contained only two parts, that of a Columbine, which she was to essay on the morrow, and that of a Harlequin, for whom he had not yet pitched

SERAPHICA

upon an interpreter. "If only your brother would do for it," he sighed, "I should not have to make a fresh engagement." Seraphica immediately begged him to let her brother have the chance, declaring her confident belief that she could coach him to do all that was necessary. Master Hardi promised to think about it, and therewith the party broke up for the night, the old hands retiring to con parts with which they were unfamiliar, Renaud to continue his love-letter, and Seraphica to read her manuscript.

More than once before she had finished her reading and puffed out her candle she was interrupted in her studies by gentle trials of the handle of her door (which she had scrupulously and securely fastened, foreseeing some such possibility), then by gentle tappings at a panel, and, finally, when these failed, by gentle entreaties for admission for a few moments' conversation on a matter of urgent importance connected with the business of the morrow. First it was Spavento who so came; then it was Leander; lastly, and most ludicrous of all, it was the bibulous Tartaglia. But Seraphica was not to be drawn, declared herself too tired for any further conversation, and insisted that the morrow's business could very well keep till the morrow. When Tartaglia, being drunk, began to talk thickly of forcing an entry, Seraphica cheerfully assured him that she carried a pistol (which was true), and that she knew very well how to use it (another truth). One after another these over-zealous suitors had to retire discomfited, and after awhile Seraphica finished her wonderful manuscript, and got to her bed and slept, to dream mad dreams.

XIX

A GOLDEN AGE

TO those who lived in it, and so living were opulent, prosperous, honorable, the Regency seemed an ideal time in the world's history. A gentry wearied of great wars which were not always successful wars, wearied of the sanctimonies that accompanied the dominion of a Maintenon, wearied of formalities, pomposities, shams, and braggadocios innumerable, found itself suddenly able to breathe more freely, to sin more liberally, to be more blithe about its vices, more merry about its pleasures, more careless of parade. To an epoch of portentous solemnity had succeeded a period of easy carriage, of hands in the pockets, of brisk whistling when the humor to whistle pricked the spirits. Nobody now had to wear a smug face because of the king's mistress, companion, wife, whatever you pleased to call that sombre personage who once was the widow of the king's buffoon. Now you might love a pretty woman, or any number of pretty women, as openly as you pleased, and the gayer your bearing, the simpler your morality, the better you were likely to pleasure the jolly fellow at the head of the state. It was a time when the well-to-do danced to dizziness; when women, for sheer hilarity, flung their beribboned bonnets over every imaginable windmill; when men, for

SERAPHICA

mere delight in the license to be brutish unashamed, imagined that the Golden Age had returned to humanity.

It was a gay time, it was a giddy time, but it was also in some regards a sufficiently grave and serious time with its own enterprises, ambitions, high politics, high finance—all the inevitabilities of a state. With these things, however, this chronicle has nothing to do. Monsieur Popelin de Secherat, in that history of Artois to which we owe so much, and which, as far as concerns itself with the Duchess Seraphica, proves itself to be incidentally a history of France, rejoices in the opportunity afforded him for handling great names, weighing great affairs, and, generally speaking, playing the part of a petty Providence. In his pages we hear much of the Regent Orleans as statesman, as honorable target for the daggers of assassins, as baffling quarry of a Duchess de Maine, and a conspiracy of Cellamare. We hear much of the Abbé Dubois, who shines in de Secherat's pages—for the man was no Tacitus—with a brighter light than later historians are inclined to accord him. Scotchman Law is largely talked of, and the Artois lawyer finds much to commend in the Mississippi scheme, from which we may not unreasonably infer a buying at the right time and a selling at the right time.

With these mighty matters our simpler muse is content to have nothing whatever to do. For her, in these few pages plucked from the golden book of the Regency, Philip of Orleans is no more and no less than the ultragallant amorist who animates so gayly and so shamelessly the memoirs of the Chevalier de Ravannes. For us the Abbé Dubois shall remain the shadow of a name, and Law prove even less substantial; for us even the Duke de Richelieu shall flit hither and thither intermittently, a

SERAPHICA

disreputable spectre. Our business is with slenderer, tenderer figures, with Seraphica of Bapaume and the foolish youth of St. Pol, and the Regency shall only be of moment in so far as it affected incidentally the whimsical itinerary of their lives. Had it been a greater or a graver age; had those that, by the will of an ironic Providence, directed its destinies, been mightier figures for good or for evil; had the fortune of France blown a louder trumpet, and the muse of history painted with a bloodier brush, still across the ampler stage, among the more majestic forms, some lover and some lass would have moved indifferent to the thunderous music, heedless of the glowing scroll, solely concerned with their love-affairs, and immovably convinced of the measureless importance of the infinitely little. The shepherd lad will pipe, and the shepherd maid will dance on the green hillside beneath whose grasses the abiding fires are striving to escape. It is enough for them if at the end of their idyl they find that they have walked hand-in-hand into some haven of safety, and learn when the eruption rends their mountain that their particular cottage is out of reach of the lava.

Let it be enough for us to remember that the court of his Royal Highness Philip, Duke of Orleans, Regent of France for the child-king, Louis XV., had the distinction of being the most dissolute court in Europe. The government of France seemed a sufficiently crazy government in all ways. An administration which obeyed the direction of the Abbé Dubois, a financial system which staggered like a drunken Titan under the influence of the heady fantasy of John Law and the strong wine of the Mississippi scheme, an executive whose existence was perpetually menaced by conspiracy at home and conspiracy

SERAPHICA

abroad, was not in a position to attract the envy or command the admiration of either philosophical or practical politicians.

But, for the most part, country people who thought at all of France and of Paris under the sway of the Regent of Orleans, thought generally of the court, and the court life, and the court splendor and the court profligacy, and, above all, of the court favorites, and among the favorites one name shone supremely, like a star—the name of the Marquise de Phalaris.

The Marquise de Phalaris was undoubtedly a very remarkable woman. Nobody could question her beauty—even those who insisted, not wholly without show of reason, that the splendor of that beauty was now a little upon the wane. Her admirers called her an Olympian creature, and read into all her actions the attributes of a Greek divinity as interpreted by an eighteenth-century court painter. Wearers of hoops and perukes found in her every accent the utterances of the sisterhood of the immortal gods. People who knew nothing of and cared less for the spirit of the little violet-crowned city in Attica insisted cheerfully that Madame de Phalaris was a happy combination of all the graces of all the goddesses—Venus, Minerva, Juno; sometimes the more daring or the more paradoxical ventured to include the name of Diana.

The detractors of Madame de Phalaris—for even divinity has its detractors—saw in her a liberally made woman with a striking face, more Jewish than Grecian, and menaced by a wholly un-Hellenic tendency to run into flesh. But, for the most part, people agreed, and Madame de Phalaris agreed with them, that she was a comely woman with whom it was sufficiently easy to fall in love. It

SERAPHICA

was not, however, more easy for men in general to fall in love with Madame de Phalaris than it was for Madame de Phalaris to fall in love with men in particular. There was, or she persuaded herself that there was, a sort of rustic simplicity in her nature, a kind of childish forgetfulness, which was perpetually enabling her to believe that her heart was whole in order that she might offer it as a becoming sacrifice to some new passion, which was always—so she assured herself and those in whom she confided—the first real passion she had ever experienced.

Without being a woman of remarkable wit, she was a woman of remarkable memory, and, in consequence, of remarkable phrases. The loftiest maxims of life floated with astonishing facility from the lips that the Regent delighted to savor; and she could assert ethical doctrines which would have converted the world into something not unlike an earthly paradise on the very morning after one of those little supper-parties for which Philip of Orleans was so pre-eminently famous. To listen to Madame de Phalaris in one of her ebullient moments—and she had an abundance of such moments—was like listening to some slightly unlettered Sibyl who had been reading in many religions and in many philosophies, and had jumbled her information into a marmalade of noisy axioms and sonorous phrases. She could intoxicate herself easily enough with the heavy vintage of unmeaning words, and her eyes would shine, and her hands clench with a fierce enthusiasm as she gave voice, for the benefit of the latest idol of her heart, to the fancies which passed in her mind for thoughts, and which her admirers were pleased to collect as wisdom.

At the moment when Renaud of St. Pol had made his

SERAPHICA

first visit to Paris the capacious heart of Madame de Phalaris happened to be temporarily tenantless. Of course there was always his Royal Highness the Regent, but Philip of Orleans was a kind of permanent institution with the fair whom he was pleased to favor, like a state church or a standing army, and did not count romantically in the calendar of the lady's passions. So when the foolish heart of Renaud of St. Pol flamed at the sight of her, Madame de Phalaris was quite willing to let his foolish lips babble the love-words that buzzed in his brain. She met him very much more than half-way; when he believed himself to be drowning in a sea of hopeless love, her large white hand was extended to pluck him from the deep and set him on dry land again, astonished and delighted to find himself a more than welcome wooer.

The enraptured Prince floated for a season in an ether of ecstasy; believed himself to be the most favored of mortals, almost a demi-god, in the glory of his great love. This was to live life to its top, he thought, in those divine hours. All that he had ever read in rhyme of love and lovers seemed to be realized for the benefit of his happy heart, and the devotion which Dante offered to the divine image of Beatrice or that Petrarch laid in vain before the pure spirit of Laura appeared to be no other than of kin with the homage he gave to a court favorite and the favor he won from a court favorite. Indeed, the love he gave was honest and simple enough, a clear and heady wine crushed from the grapes of song grown in the vineyard of dreams, and he truly believed himself to be blessed beyond all humanity because a loose woman had taken a whim for his company, and professed to be enchanted when he wrote rambling verses to her in which he com-

SERAPHICA

pared her, greatly to her advantage, with every dear, adorably named she-divinity who ever wandered in the hills and woods of Hellas.

Renaud was not ignorant, indeed, of the existence of Philip of Orleans, but he knew—because she told him so—that the Regent belonged only to an unhappy past which she had blotted out with tears of blood. The thought of any other lover in the so-glorious now never troubled his shepherd-simple soul. When his idol clung to him with her great white arms, and seemed to melt his very heart with the light of self-love in her eyes, he could as soon have believed in the falseness of an angel as in any stain of frailty on such a radiant nature.

While they lasted, these days were enchanted days for Prince Renaud. His innocent, poetic spirit floated ecstatically in an astonishing, unreal world of ethereal sunlight or clarified moonbeams, peopled with gracious lovers in exquisite costumes, always glad, always loyal, always enamoured, whose business it was to form a kind of fantastic court for that queen of all fair women who reigned over his unsophisticated heart. His head was dizzy with delightful thoughts, and he translated the terms of the workaday world about him into astonishing words, colored and bright as the wings of butterflies or humming-birds. He seemed to walk, like the knight of the flowers in the ancient fairy legend, through a miraculous garden, where all the blooms and buds of blossoms carried the faces of gracious girls, who smiled in vain upon him whose faithful eyes were fixed only on the imposing loveliness of Madame de Phalaris.

The past was past indeed for him; he reeled with happiness in the radiant present, and was too much overjoyed

SERAPHICA

in the belief in his idol's present purity and future constancy to waste one golden moment in a regret that other hands than his had ever pressed her white fingers or caressed her adorable tresses. Life appeared to him at once exquisitely ideal and divinely final. This was by far the best that the world could offer to any man, and he was the fortunate being to whom the world had been good enough to offer it.

He did not speculate very seriously as to the future; he was convinced, of course, that he would go on loving Madame de Phalaris forever, and that she would go on loving him forever; and that somehow or other they would go away from the tainted, glaring court hand-in-hand, like a pair of happy children, and drift away together to St. Pol in Artois and a peaceful, happy life.

Poor Renaud was not to be greatly blamed for his madness. Children composed of such poetic stuff as he will always remain children, will always dream childish dreams, and will bring to the great, mean games of life something of the infantile intensity and the infantile power of make-believe rich rules and revels in the nursery. But Madame de Phalaris, for her part, if she was childish, too, was childish in a very different manner. She was simple enough in her way, with most of the unamiable simplicities: she was frankly selfish, frankly greedy, a flaming egotist. Like her lover, she could deceive herself into believing in an ideal; but her belief had not the power of lasting long, and the wind of her whimsies swung her to every quarter of the card like a weather-cock. Although she appeared to be the most sensitive creature imaginable, whose eyes would brim with ready tears at any tender, pathetic story, although she seemed to overflow with

SERAPHICA

sympathy for the sorrows and sufferings of a sorrowing and suffering world, she was in grain a serenely heartless, practical person with a sound digestion and that splendid indifference to everything not directly concerning her own interests which passes readily enough with a gaping audience for proof of a sweet temper and a sunny disposition.

She began to find the heady frenzy of Prince Renaud's passion a trifle wearying and wearing. It fatigued her to be placed, as he persisted in placing her, upon a pedestal to be worshipped as an ideal of all the graces and all the virtues. It had amused her—and surprised her—at first. It had tickled her egotism, flattered her vanity; it gave a sensation unusual to experience at the Regent's court, where the men and women were so flagrantly practical in their gallantries, and where this honest, fervid, head-strong and unchangeable devotion of Prince Renaud's came with the cool cleanness of a country breeze and the cool fragrance of a bunch of country flowers.

But Madame de Phalaris knew very well in her heart that she was distinctly lower than the angels, and the pretence of wearing their unsullied plumage soon fretted her spirit into an exasperation of revolt. It was all very well for Prince Renaud to assure her, with the truth shining through his candid eyes, that there was no other woman in the world for him. There were a great many other men in the world for Madame de Phalaris, and she could share with no enthusiasm in the future so rose-red and so honey-sweet which Renaud loved to picture of their life together in Artois. Familiar with the plangent splendors of the Regent's court, she could not seriously reconcile herself to settling down in a dull little province with a

SERAPHICA

dull little chief town, where the best to be hoped was to ape, on a scale drawn by pygmies, the glories of Paris and the graces of Versailles.

Moreover, the Duke de Richelieu, that omnivorous lover, had swung into her ken—a flamboyant personality, whose ways of wooing had nothing of the madrigal, but whose personality began to assume heroic proportions in the kingdom of her unsteady mind. She found herself yawning fitfully when Renaud was most rhapsodical; she shuddered in his absence, not because he was absent, but because he was not long to be so—because he would be sure to come seeking her through garden glade, or palace corridor, with the same absurd worship shining in his eyes, and the same high-flown phrases rippling from his lips.

When Madame de Phalaris got tired of anything, she wasted no time and stuck at no principle to rid herself of its worry. The Regent was always royally jealous, and she played upon that string in him to free herself from the irritating fidelity of the young Prince of St. Pol.

Poor Renaud would probably have fallen upon his own sword in second-hand Roman fashion if he could have dreamed that his deportation from Paris to Artois had been due to the dexterous insinuations and suggestions of his dear divinity. Happily, or unhappily, for him he did not, could not, guess at such frailty; and while he raged in exile at the ungentlemanly violence of the Regent, he was convinced in his sylvan heart that Madame de Phalaris suffered as he suffered, and pined as he pined.

When, therefore, he had resolved to return to Paris and challenge the Regent to meet him blade to blade, he was confident that his ladylove would hail him as Andromeda

SERAPHICA

hailed Perseus, or as the sweet Egyptian Princess hailed St. George; that she would gladly accept her deliverance at his sword's point, and would ride away with him to fairyland like a happy liberated child. It was in this belief that he had ridden to the capital; it was in this belief that he had accepted the aid of an inn-maid; it was in this belief that he had entered the service of Master Hardi and muffled his visage with the comic mask.

XX

A GARDEN THEATRE

MASTER HARDI was not quite as important a person as he wished to make himself appear in the eyes of the real and the sham Gillette. All his fine-flown talk about his intimacy with the Regent and his importance at the Regent's court was little better than a bam. The true state of his case, as one may learn from Martigny de la Planche, in his amusing *Histoire des Bouffons de Cet Age*, was this: He had been a provincial player of a somewhat broad and heavy kind, and he had taken the taste of the provincials by his labored humor and emphatic comedy. In the fulness of time he had found himself not uncomfortably off, and very comfortably sustained by the confident belief that he was little less than a new Molière. This belief had tricked him to the writing of sundry intolerable comedies, and with these in his wallet he travelled to Paris with the ambition of astonishing the capital.

It was his hope to be allowed to start a theatre of his own, but this hope did not seem to be very near fulfilment, and he was growing at once impatient and discontented when his name came to the ears of a certain painter who remembered to have seen him in a provincial town in earlier years, and to have been diverted by his buffoon-

SERAPHICA

eries. It was one of the curious desires of this painter to bring about the recall to Paris of those fantastic Italian players who had been banished from the French stage in the reign of the late king. To further his purpose, he persuaded the Regent, who was easily persuaded to anything that the painter wished, to let him contrive a little entertainment for the boy-king in the gardens of Versailles. The painter's intention was to gather together a small company of French actors, and by training them to appear in the habits and humors of the banished masks to win the interest of Philip of Orleans, and so bring about the recall of the exiles. It was for this purpose that he had come to Master Hardi, and had employed him to gather together a sufficient number of men and women to interpret for a few performances such pieces as the painter should choose, the painter being responsible for their production and for the costumes the players were to wear.

It was, therefore, as the painter's servant rather than as the Regent's friend that Master Hardi had busied himself in selecting the men and women who now were sheltered beneath the roof of the Plucked Peacock, and that Master Hardi had travelled to Compiègne, where some portion of his former theatrical wardrobe was housed. If, however, Master Hardi exaggerated his office considerably, it really mattered very little. The pith of the business in his mind was that for a time at least he was to be manager of a theatre in the gardens of Versailles, and that he was to have the honor of presenting his company to the King, the Regent, and the court. He said nothing at all, therefore, in his conversation with his subordinates about the painter, who was the master-mind

SERAPHICA

of the gracious little plot, but, on the other hand, he said an intolerable deal about the Regent.

In one of the most pleasing corners of the ever-pleasing gardens of Versailles, Master Hardi had been privileged to pitch his tent—or, in other words, to set up a miniature theatre—in which he was to do his best, with the aid of his newly privileged company of Italianates, to divert the somewhat melancholy spirits of the child-king.

The spot where the little theatre stood was certainly delightfully chosen, proclaimedly by the delicate taste of the Regent himself, casually on the counsels of another who took a wayward delight in Italian fantastic figures that peopled the Italian Comedy of Masks. It stood on the arc of a lawny amphitheatre, from which green alleys radiated in all directions, mystically shaded, towards enchanted glades. Marble seats and marble images of the Olympians and their kin showed cool and white against the triumphant green of grass and tree, and the air on sultry days was rendered sweet and fragrant by the leaping waters of many fountains. It was the very place for labored pastoral, for escape, if only for a time, from the formalities of an over-gilded life into a kingdom of dreams, themselves somewhat formal it may be, but with a formality of a differing kind, more supple, more suavely colored, more daintily habited in clothes of lovelier line and easier carriage. It afforded a painter a background for radiant fancies, gay in his eyes and under his fingers with a kind of unearthly gayety, whose careless bravery was tempered, too, by a melancholy that was never the melancholy of earth. Here it pleased him to think that the fantasticals of Italian comedy should present themselves, translated, indeed, into a French fashion and a French speech, but

SERAPHICA

still with all their age-mellowed humors, with all their pungent traditions, with all the grace and all the grotesqueness of their costumes, before an audience, over-charged indeed in hue, over-marked in individual outline, yet, nevertheless, composing harmoniously into a mass that was full of suggestion for a colorist.

He that had picked the site had designed the theatre. It was not in the nature of things to be an enduring building, yet it was so excellently contrived as to present the appearance of abiding solidity. Its delicate columns, that might have been of marble; its frieze, with its vivid scheme of moving figures; its pediment, with its whimsical divinities, gave it the air of a pagan temple, not Greek, indeed, nor Roman, but some such shrine as men of pleasant temper might design from slight knowledge and unguided love of the wonders of an older world. The lack of coloring which a man of the ancient days would have deplored, finding the whiteness too defiant on a golden day, too depressing on a gray day, was in a measure compensated for by the beauty of the great blue curtains, looped and drawn by silver cords with silver tassels that shielded the stage. These curtains were of a blue that the designer had found some difficulty in persuading the weavers and dyers of the royal looms to give him, but which, in its appointed place, blended very exquisitely with earth's green and white and the blue and white of heaven. Perhaps Master Hardi would have wished for another kind of theatre, something more gaudy, something more pompous, something more heavily charged with gold and ornament. But he had to take what he was given, and he had, truly, nothing to complain of in the appointments of his stage, nor in the comfort of the rooms apportioned in the

SERAPHICA

body of the seeming temple for his company of players. It was, indeed, a delightful shrine for the whimsical Italian pieces and the fantastic Italian characters that were to be aped there—the shadows of the Masks, as it were, rejoicing in their renewed birthright of liberty, in their seeming redemption from ban, a redemption owed to him who had designed their house, and who had, at least in effigy, rescued them from exile because they were dear to his unquiet spirit and to his memories.

That part of the royal gardens in which Master Hardi's theatre was established was cut off and sequestered from the rest of the park by a gilded palisade that girdled it for a great distance, and shut it up in a fairly spacious paradise of its own. The gates of this palisade were guarded by sentinels, and few indeed were privileged with a permission to pass through, for it was the painter's wish that the players should be left in peace and ease to make ready their entertainment.

It was all to be an enchanting surprise, this reappearance of a proscribed form of art. That art was to justify itself by its freshness, its spontaneity, its perfect readiness to play on all the lighter, brighter strings of life. Might it not even be possible, as it seemed to the troubled mind of the painter, to blend with the gay elements of the fanciful fabric some strands of more sober, more sombre matter, to evolve from the clash of those spritely personalities some sterner music than the rattle of tambourines and the babble of mandolines. He dreamed of extracting from the antics of his masks scenes that might be bitter and even terrible, as well as winsome or ridiculous. He was for shuffling the familiar cards in a new fashion, for making a new game out of the old combinations.

SERAPHICA

Whatever might come of his scheme it needed quiet, isolation, freedom from comment or inquiry. Hence the lonely temple in its tranquil paradise, and the gilded palisade with its obstinately guarded gates.

To this temple came Master Hardi with his little company of players to rehearse their entertainments. When the enterprise had first been suggested he was all for adaptations from the familiar repertory of the banished Italian masks; weighed the merits of the "Constant Widow" against the "Enchanted Window," applauded the mirthfulness of "The Flying Doctor," the earnestness of "The Queen of England," and grew eloquent over the merits of "The Cruel Father" and "The Fatal Sword."

But he that was the chief mover in the enterprise, that had breathed the breath of life into an idle whimsy, and that labored now with a delicate seriousness over what he had initiated as a jest, this person would have none of these proposals. Let us leave, so he insisted, the Italian plays for the Italian players when they return. Be it enough for us to essay some fancy of our own fashion with the dainty figures from the Comedy of Masks—figures that, as they speak in French, shall, further, wear a French air, wearing fairer habits, carrying clearer colors, swaying in a finer ether, wooing and singing and mocking, and whiles weeping, in a world less crudely sunlit. And because he was the chief mover in the adventure, and because his pleasure made the law of the game, Master Hardi had to give way to him and to accept with the dissatisfaction of a class that dislikes any new thing the delicately written manuscript that was handed to him. He read it with a sour disapproval that persisted as he copied out the parts for his players, and he grumbled

SERAPHICA

beneath his breath at the evil of court influence that placed him at a painter's mercy.

But where Master Hardi was dissatisfied, Seraphica was glad. She could guess but dimly at the movement of the piece from the unmeaning cues that preceded her speeches, but the words that she had to say delighted her. They seemed to call to her with soft voices from a country where she had never been, but where, almost unconsciously, she had always longed to go. She was deeply moved, but could not clearly understand why she was so moved. The verses were of a kind very unfamiliar to her, stirred by a strange passion that seemed to lure and to elude, that masked its vehemence and its poignancy by trifling and childish sport with rose-petals, that veiled itself in bright and delicate colors, that moved to the strains of an unearthly music, quick with a fairylike mirth, teasing, provoking, and ready to change at any moment into such a dirgelike sadness as might accompany the burial of an elf and voice the pathos of so small and gay a creature, suddenly robbed of his heritage of immortality.

The drinking-songs, the love-songs that had delighted Godefroi were not of this quality. They smacked of the camp, they smacked of the bagnio; for Godefroi the seventeenth, though he tried in his way to be careful with the child, too often forgot that his girl-boy was not indeed the very boy he would have begotten, the boy whom he would have rejoiced to mold in his own image, soldier, roysterer, extravagant gallant, illimitable drinker. If Duchess Seraphica knew more of the world than most maidens of her age, and probably all other maidens of her station, she had partly to thank the barrack-room fancies of a father whose memory she still cherished.

SERAPHICA

Bad as her education might seem, it had its advantage: she did not, in a time when a woman's innocence was far from being her best defence, go like a simpleton upon her pilgrimage.

But the education which had stiffened her sinews and steeled her nerves, which had made her the mistress-master of swordplay and pistol-aim, which had sometimes polluted her pink lips with the songs that troopers sing, and helped her shrewd intelligence to detest the glozing gallantries of the mode, had not prepared her for this new knowledge that set a sleeping spirit stirring. These verses, at once so seemingly languid and so really alive with their beauty as of a breathless summer's day, and their irony, as of the lightning that sometimes splits the dusk, the dark of such a day, roused thoughts in her as unfamiliar as sweet. The words she had to speak seemed to have something of the enigmatic charm of rare, pale jewels, colored like the sea, colored like the moon, colored like wine, fluent, magical, maddening, surpassing in their strange influence stones more noble in the eye of the trader, more glowing to the eye of the slave. The lines were alive with desires, all so delicately tempered that they seemed like sighs; yet again, in an instant, you took them for smiles; then shivered as they turned to the bitterness of unweepable tears.

What was this Columbine who said so much, said so little, who offered with so dainty a mutiny, with so discreet a surrender, the heart of a sphinx from the body of a child? She was Diana, she was Venus, she was a Princess in Porcelain, she was a girl of the gutter, she was woman, she was witch, so ever ready to solace longing, so ever unattainable, always to be pursued, and never

SERAPHICA

so aloof as when she lay, laughing, panting, and willing, in her lover's arms.

Seraphica was no such fantastical creature; her instincts were sane and simple, her mind was as healthy and as directly strong as her body; if she was not very positive as to what she thought right and what she thought wrong, she knew very positively what she wanted in life and what she did not want, and her purpose was not to be fanned by any flattery from the path of her will to the path of her unwill. But this mystical, whimsical, inexpressive divinity, this Columbine that an unknown hand had fashioned with words of laughter, with words of white fire, for her to mimic, bewildered her, enchanted her, set her cool blood dancing, set her strong wit spinning, made her feel like the mountebank she aped, made her feel like the angel she never desired to be. Columbine skipped amid the wanton flutterings of her skirts, but about her mocking head there floated the nimbus of at least a pagan heaven.

Holding the scroll of paper on which Master Hardi's blunt handwriting had transcribed, how inappropriately, those perplexing, exquisite fancies, Seraphica strolled leisurely up and down the grassy space in front of Master Hardi's theatre. There was to be a rehearsal of the mysterious piece, and Seraphica had purposely arrived before her time that in the quiet of the spot she might say to herself those lines of which she already knew the beauty, but did not yet know the significance. The morning air was grateful, the little temple showed pleasantly white in the clean light. Seraphica's thoughts were a confused medley of delight in the words of Columbine and diversion at the adventures of the Duchess of Bapaume. But

SERAPHICA

these thoughts were briskly dissipated by the sudden discovery in the middle of one of her leisurely progresses across the sward that she was not alone in the quiet place.

A man, who must have approached unheard by one of the grassy alleys, was leaning against a tree-trunk, busy with a note-book and a pencil. As he looked over from the page in his palm to her, and so back again to his paper, while he swiftly plied his chalk, it was patent to Seraphica that he was making her his model for a sketch. Perhaps he was one of Hardi's company; perhaps, guessing from his occupation, he was the designer of costumes. Whoever he was, the man's task and the man himself attracted Seraphica's interest, and without hesitation she advanced towards him across the grass to make a nearer acquaintance with his person and his work. She felt, not indeed angry at the unexpected intrusion upon her quiet, but certainly surprised. In the loneliness of the courtly gardens she had in her thoughtlessness become Duchess of Bapaume again, and with a right to question the stranger within her gates. And she did question, very pleasantly, but very decidedly, as one that had a right to question, and not as a humble member of a cry of players.

"What are you doing?" she asked. And then added: "Let me see what you are doing."

While she spoke she studied the man, who had never ceased to use his pencil, and found in his appearance much to be approved, and in much puzzling.

The man was clad, with more simplicity than neatness, in a habit of brown cloth of such a color as if it had been dyed in a pigment drawn from autumnal leaves. If his body-clothes were plain, the lace at his wrists and throat,

SERAPHICA

the silk of his stockings, were of the finest kind; but everything was worn negligently; in a word, the man had the air of an elegant sloven. Seraphica noted so much at a glance, but she noted most the face of the stranger—a face still young but oddly care-worn, a little wrinkled, somewhat quizzical, a great deal wistful, graced with a pair of fine eyes that shone with an ironic melancholy and a sensual mouth that looked pathetic in repose. The nose, somehow, was the humorous feature of the face; perhaps the humor lay in the way it seemed bevelled at the point. His powdered wig fell carelessly about his shoulders—neither too well powdered, nor too heedfully worn. Seraphica saw in the same second that a habitual weariness of expression, of carriage, was now for the moment quickened into a spasm of interest, and that there were little specks of colored paint here and there upon his garments, red and blue and green and yellow.

“Let me see what you are doing,” she said again. And then, with a little laugh, but with no words, he ceased the play of his pencil and turned the note-book towards her.

Seraphica took the book from his unresisting fingers, looked on the open page, and gave a little cry of pleasure and admiration. On the page was a sketch of herself just as she walked there unconscious of observation—a sketch that lived and was beautiful. It was she as she moved, her movements seized on the instant by the hand of cunning and arrested there forever, for as long as that scrap of paper might be permitted to endure. It was she even to the face, observed too far away to be translated precisely, but suggested so deftly, so delicately that even an over-praised girl felt a new and almost painful pleasure in the thought that she was fair. It was she, and yet it

SERAPHICA

was more than she—it was she as she would wish to be, as she might be in some kingdom of dreams.

Did she carry herself so daintily, like a miniature divinity? Did her garments flow in such loveable lines? Was her head poised with such provocative sweetness? Seraphica did not know much about art, but she knew something. Those old Flemings were famous lovers of painting, and there were great treasures of form and color in the galleries of Bapaume, from which her eager eyes had learned enough to tell her that she held a thing of truth and beauty and mastercraft in her hands.

She looked from the drawing to the man, who still leaned against the tree and gazed at her with drolling eyes. As she looked she knew why she liked his face so well, why she found it so friendly. It was because the face had something of the Flemish regularity which she knew so well and cherished so fondly. She still held the drawing in her hand as she spoke, and she spoke, unconsciously, with the air of one who expects her words, and above all her praise, to have weight, and her manner did not lessen the quiet laughter in the man's eyes.

"This is beautiful," she said; "this is I, but it is more beautiful than I."

The man, still smiling, so that his untimely wrinkles seemed to be no more than the kindly assertion of good humor, made no effort to contradict her.

"Still, you are very beautiful," he affirmed. And to Seraphica, forgetfully airing the great lady, the absence of courtly denial gave no surprise and no chagrin, for the quiet words were spoken in such a way as seemed, indefinitely, to set such a seal upon her comeliness as courtly praises never yet had done.

SERAPHICA

"I am glad you think so," she said, and spoke honestly, for praise from the maker of that sketch plainly meant a great deal, and she looked again loving at the drawing before she made to hand the book back to him. He took it gently from fingers that seemed reluctant to surrender it.

"I will do better than this of you," he said, slowly, looking first at his work and then at the woman with his large eyes, where melancholy and mockery reigned. "Who are you?" he asked. And then fortunately answered his question for himself by adding, "One of Hardi's people, I suppose." For Seraphica, in the fascination of the moment, was very much upon the point of shedding her assumption.

"Yes," she responded, demurely, congratulating herself upon her escape, "I am one of Hardi's players; I am to be his Columbine."

The eyes of the man brightened, and the smile, that made his face seem so kind in spite of its irony, shone more strongly.

"I am glad to hear that," he asserted, eagerly. "I hoped as much—I guessed as much—when I saw you here just now. What is your name, child?"

"My name," said Seraphica, "is Gillette, and I come from the country to make my fortune."

The man laughed rather bitterly at the borrowed simplicity of this confession.

"To make your fortune," he repeated. "How many come to Paris on that errand, and how few succeed! Lord! Lord! how hard a job it is to make a fortune!" He said these words so sourly that Seraphica could not doubt that he was thinking of his own case, and it was with an impatient gesture, as if to dissipate such thoughts,

SERAPHICA

that he resumed his discourse with a question: "Do you like your part, child?"

"I love it," Seraphica answered, emphatically, and then laughed at her own vehemence, because the man was laughing, too.

But though he laughed he seemed mightily pleased, and he showed the cause of his pleasure when he said: "That is a good speech for him to hear who wrote the play."

"Did you write it?" Seraphica cried, excitedly. And when the stranger nodded his smiling head and looked at her very comically, she said, with a little touch of familiar imperiousness: "Who are you who can do such wonderful things? You have my name; give me yours."

"My name is Antoine."

This was not enough for Seraphica's curiosity. "Antoine what?" she questioned anew, as one that was not to be denied, and the man completed his answer:

"Antoine Watteau."

In an instant Seraphica had dipped him a magnificent courtesy, so swimmingly profound that it seemed as if she were about to fling herself at the great man's feet. Then swanlike she swam up again through the soft air to the level of his eyes, and stood before him with the glow of homage on her eyes and on her lips and in her heart.

"Now," she cried, somewhat inconsequently, "now I know why I liked your face so much! I saw Flanders in your face."

The painter smiled.

"Are you Flemish?" he asked, nationally sympathetic.

And Seraphica immediately replied, "Why, of course I am," and then halted, remembering that there was no reason patent to her companion why she must of course

SERAPHICA

be Flemish. "I hail from French Flanders," she said, thoughtfully, when she had recollected herself; "but it seems a long while since I was there," which, indeed, was true.

"So you are my countrywoman," said Watteau. "I am glad of it. We shall work together with the more intelligence. The Parisians are charming—ah, charming." And he sighed as he spoke, as if some gray thought dashed him a little, though he instantly brightened and went on: "But I have always thought Flemish women the fairest and the wisest in the world."

Seraphica dipped him another little courtesy, more impudent this time and less reverential, for she was quickly getting on terms with greatness—a courtesy on behalf of her countrywomen in general and of herself in particular as their present representative.

"It is a long time since you have been in Flanders," she said, half question, half assertion. Watteau nodded his head.

"A long time, a long, long time. But I hope to go back some time—some time before I die."

"May the king live forever!" Seraphica murmured.

Watteau heard her, and smiled wistfully. "Well," he said, "I hope I shall live long enough to paint Columbine."

Seraphica's eyes widened. "Do you mean to paint me, master?" she asked, all afire with pride. There might have been little difficulty or no difficulty in persuading the King's painter to put the Duchess of Bapaume on one of his canvasses; but for Watteau, of his own motion, to choose the unknown country-girl among Master Hardi's players for his model—this was a compliment to her beauty

SERAPHICA

which went a long way to soothe the still tingling smart of the insolence of Prince Renaud.

Watteau followed the fire of pleasure kindling in her brilliant face, and was in his turn pleased and flattered.

"Surely," he said, with a daffing air of humility—"surely, if you will suffer it." The humility was false, for he knew well enough that there was no woman in France who would not rejoice to be limned by his wonder-working brushes. But he was so thoroughly the subject of beauty that while he knew his power, he was honestly modest about it.

Seraphica reddened with pleasure, for she remembered now very well that the painter was making this precious tender to the girl Gillette of Hardi's troop, and was as ignorant as you please of the Duchess of Bapaume.

"You make me very proud," she protested. And gave him again one of those wavelike courtesies, her garments billowing about her capriciously as she sank and soared. The painter nodded good-humoredly.

"We will settle time and place later," he said, amiably; "but now you have other work in hand than wasting your graces on me, for here comes Master Hardi, hot with present purpose of rehearsal."

Seraphica, following the direction of his glance, saw indeed that Master Hardi had entered the gardens, and was making across to the theatre with a little cloud of his comedians at his heels—a modest-looking company of persons enough in their workaday apparel. The very tail of them all, she discerned poor Prince Renaud, his elegant figure muffled in a misfitting suit of black from Master Hardi's wardrobe. It became him mightily ill,

SERAPHICA

but had the advantage of masking his personality. Few would have detected under those dingy trappings the sprightly gallant and elegant gentleman whose impertinent parade of ill-timed passion had caused such a hubbub at the court of France.

XXI

A MASTER OF GALLANTRY

SERAPHICA had found it hard in later days to recall in their historical order all the events of those early hours of her association with Master Hardi's company of players. She found herself plunged all of a sudden into the whirl of a comedian's life with all its exigencies of rehearsal and assiduities of attendance. The business, after all, came easily enough to her, for she had the trick of it in her blood, being, as it were, born a player, and by divine permission a mime. It did not take long to make it plain to her that the painter's masquerade was the cause which had called the garden theatre into being, and that Master Hardi's assumed importance was no more than a far-off consequence of the real importance of Watteau. She heartily sympathized with the painter's wish to recall the Italian Masks from exile, and she readily understood that in such a nature as Watteau's love for the Masks was natural enough, and natural also the desire to deal with those Masks in the medium of another art from that in which he had already realized the raptures of an imaginary kingdom of dreams, that was itself a mask of exquisite shadows.

The preparations for the proposed entertainment were made very quickly and very easily, thanks to the strenuous

SERAPHICA

earnestness of the painter, passionately pleased with his new toy, but thanks also to Seraphica's astonishing aptitude for the theatre life, and the quickness with which she had already committed her words to memory. She enchanted Watteau by her appreciation of his comedy; she delighted Master Hardi by her skill as an actress; she also astonished him by the dexterity with which she contrived to shake and coax and tease and plague Renaud into the very creditable semblance of a player. She showed him what to do and what to say, and made him do it and say it; she inspired him to a show of passion by bidding him pretend in his feigned wooing of Columbine that he was pouring his soul's homage into the ears of Madame de Phalaris. Thus it came about that in what were relatively a very few hours it was possible for Watteau to request his royal master and certain chosen persons of his royal master's court to be present at a theatrical entertainment on the stage of Master Hardi's theatre in the gardens of Versailles. Watteau's chief share in the day's pleasure was his little mask-comedy, "Queen Columbine," which was to form the second portion of the performance. For the first he had lightly parodied one of the old, familiar, masking buffooneries—a skeleton plot depending upon improvisation to carry it along, and called "The Golden Nose."

But those wonderful, hurried, multi-colored hours of Seraphica's life were not wholly occupied with the theatre.

Antoine Watteau enjoyed the privilege of a room in the palace which could be used as a studio, thanks to the favor of his patron, the Regent, who delighted to call himself his devoted friend. To this studio Seraphica came on the morning after her meeting with the painter in the

SERAPHICA

glades of Versailles, and here she gave Watteau her first sitting for the famous picture of Columbine, which he afterwards finished under other conditions. The original picture is undoubtedly, in spite of the arguments of many critics, the canvas which adorns the walls of the Art Museum of Arras, and the picture which is the pride of the collection of a New York millionaire is no more than a copy, although a very admirable copy, by Lancret.

Those hours in the studio of Watteau always remained in Seraphica's mind among the most exquisite, the most cherished, of her memories. They were many hours, and yet they were few hours. They seemed, perhaps, the more numerous because few of them were consecutive. They were hours stolen from the early morning before rehearsal began, hours seized in intervals of rest from rehearsals, hours of golden afternoon when rehearsals had ended, and when the light was still lovely enough and clear enough to illuminate the work of the master. So it came about that though, as men count time, Seraphica and Antoine were not really very much in each other's company, it seemed, in the retrospect and even in the enduring, longer than it was, partly, perhaps, because these two natures, so exquisitely adapted to understand each other, found themselves to be age-long friends before others, less favored, could have conceived of acquaintanceship.

Antoine had brought a number of his canvases, half finished or quarter finished, and of his sketches, to the studio, and as they stood about the formal, royal room, with its rigidity and its gilding and its insistence of a stiff-necked generation, like memories of fairy tales in the house of Midas, Antoine could hardly persuade his Co-

SERAPHICA

lumbine to refrain from the contemplation of those creations which portrayed a fellowship of beings, men and women such as in the flesh the world has never seen and never will see. She never tired of admiring those exquisite women whose delicate voluptuousness was rendered more alluring and more mysterious by their faint yet almost menacing suggestion of a supernatural chastity. She delighted in the men, too, so gallant, so foppish, so roguish, so spiritual in their effrontery, so whimsical in their desires, so living, so loving, so dreamlike, so altogether tragic. Tragic, indeed, was the word that seemed in the end best fitted to those exquisite images. None of the Old Dances of Death, which she had seen still lingering on the walls of church-yard cloisters in Artois, seemed to her to have any of the agonizing pathos which flowed from the golden atmosphere of this pageant of brightly clad, beautiful creatures, busy, to all appearance, only with the sweeter sensualities of existence. Even while her whole soul rejoiced in the glory of color, in all the delicacies of red, in all the clarities of yellow, in all the harmonies of blue, and the lambencies of gold and silver, the sum of all those associated hues, related to each other with something of the fine lawfulness of music, was yet more sombre than a pall, more sinister than a dirge. It was by intuition that Antoine guessed her thoughts; it was by intuition that Seraphica understood that she read his meaning rightly, that in those gallant canvases, so splendid, so tender, so melancholy, a painter, sick at heart, strove to portray an ideal age he should never know and never realize.

When the sitting had begun it was joyous enough; it delighted Seraphica to watch the master at work, to see

would
of
the
color
was
in
it

handle that ill-tended palette from whose soiled con-
on he could conjure so much loveliness of colors, as
urprised her to watch the painting of coloring caught
n the clear air, and gold and silver stolen from the
nal sunrise and sunset, liberally treating his canvas
n oil from a filthy bottle clouded with the dregs of
or from the leavings of many brushes.

It was a joy, too, to listen while Antoine talked. A man
some shyness and much bitterness, he seemed at once
be familiar and at his ease with her, and, being no
over shy, was perhaps, therefore, no longer bitter. He
to told her of many things, of all things that came into
long mind, and talked of all things well, lending to his
talked, and the associations conjured by his words, some-
his mind: the coloring of his canvases. As if she had
words, it, though indeed she had not, he delivered him-
thing of, but restraint as to the mood of disappointment
spoken of, but he considered the prevailing influence in
self without work. He could not be content with life as
which might whole being hungered and thirsted for the
his creative had never known and never should know.
it was; his earned for something subtler and stranger
life which he he could give; spurred by desires he shud-
A lover, he yet and found ever the reality unworthy of

dered at satiety,
the dream.

"I am a libertine
sigh, "and yet I am
of the monk. I but
when I seek to realize
and the longings with
can offer them. I think
and his naked women,

ne," he said, with a laugh and with a
a libertine who wears the hair-shirt
orn with exquisite longings, and yet
them they are no longer exquisite,
er under the best reward success
the Regent, with his rank suppers
is happier than I, for he knows

SERAPHICA

exactly what he wants and gets it, and is perfectly content in the getting; and I—I hardly know what I want, but only know that I never get it, and never shall get it, and shall always be discontented."

Then he began to talk of the Regent's court and the men and women that made it, and painted for Seraphica little word-pictures of them, all very true and very cunning and very cruel. He seemed to like none of them men or women; but most of all he seemed to dislike the Duke de Richelieu, a creature who, as he said, spoiled all beautiful things, love and gallantry and desire, who added vulgarity to lust, made infidelity ridiculous, and made the love of women something as ugly as the disease of a glutton.

From speculations such as these he passed to the speech of his own loves. He told Seraphica, and interested her much in the telling, of his love for La Montague, that wild, ungovernable, unreasonable passion which has immortalized her fair face on so many canvases. "I loved her very dearly," he protested; "perhaps I shall love her again—who knows? Love has its recurring cadences."

Then, which was still more interesting to Seraphica, Antoine began to make love to her. He did it very gracefully, very dexterously, very subtly. Seraphica appreciated the art in the process; she appreciated, too, behind the art, the tribute of a man who saw in her something he had not yet seen in women. It was a dexterously balanced gallantry against whose attacks Seraphica was perfectly able to hold her own. She felt the charm of his wooing, and yet she was not won. She almost wondered why, as she listened. It was not because she was a great lady who was playing a school-girl's trick; her greatness

SERAPHICA

would have counted for nothing with her in the presence of any man who could succeed in touching her heart; but this neither the warmth nor the wistfulness of Antoine could do, and she found herself—even when the painter was, as it were, singing his sweetest—thinking, and thinking to her vexation, of the face and the voice of another man.

XXII

“QUEEN COLUMBINE”

THE golden hours came and went like a bewildering dream to Seraphica, and, in a very short space of days Master Hardi and his little company of human puppets were ready to set their show before the King. Indeed, they needed no long time for their preparations, for the parts in “Queen Columbine” were easy to learn, all the characters save Harlequin and Columbine being slight and shadowy, while in “The Golden Nose,” in which neither Seraphica nor Renaud appeared, there were practically no parts to learn, as the actors were expected to improvise their way across the field of action.

Seraphica felt much self-satisfaction at the manner in which she was able to make something like a player of Renaud. She had briskly bullied him into learning his lesson; she had taught him how to move and stand and speak, and if he still remained a thought wooden, that was not an ill-fitting carriage for the part and did not jar. And so it came to pass that on an early day of Seraphica’s escapade she found herself emerging from her dressing-room for her first appearance, all Columbine in the radiant grace and daintiness of the costume that Watteau had designed.

The first performance of “The Golden Nose” had just

SERAPHICA

concluded as Seraphica came to the stage. She found the actors dressed in the costume of the Comedy of Masks standing about the stage staring with drawn, painted faces, while Hardi, pale with rage, harangued them,

"Sons of sorrow, daughters of despair"—thus Master Hardi addressed them—"do you long for the tragic laurels that you are so fatally unfunny? His Majesty never smiled once, and you are supposed to be playing a farce."

Captain Spavento fingered his sword and defended himself and his fellows fretfully.

"It is hard to amuse a child. The ladies and lords would have laughed if the boy had been less stockish."

Master Hardi glared at him.

"That's right," he said, with an ironical air of applause, "add treason to incapacity." Suddenly he blazed out again, raising his hands in condemnation, "Be off, the lot of you."

The vexed, dejected players scurried away. In front of the curtain the fiddlers were bowing an interlude. Seraphica came up to Master Hardi and plucked him by the sleeve.

"Master Hardi," she asked, mischievously sympathetic, "why are you worrying and flurrying?"

Master Hardi turned to her a red face shining with sweat, and appealed to her with extended palms.

"Here am I privileged to play before the King, and my mimes are as frigid as fishes."

Seraphica patted his arms consolingly.

"Never mind," she said, confidently, "it's my turn next."

Master Hardi tickled his chin with a fat forefinger.

SERAPHICA

"Your first appearance," he murmured, glumly. "Suppose you fail?"

Seraphica laughed softly, a little laugh that was full of cheer. And, indeed, she was quite cheerful and self-possessed and sure of herself.

"Don't fret," she said, calmly, "I'm not going to fail. Where are my spectators?" She tripped to the curtain and peeped through one of the eyeholes. "A good audience. Is that poor little, pale, sick, miserable lad the King?"

Master Hardi, quite horrified, answered her and contradicted her in the same breath.

"That beautiful, healthy boy is his Sacred Majesty."

Seraphica heaved a little sigh of compassion.

"Poor baby," she thought, "he ought to be jolly and rompy and fight with other boys." Her gaze travelled over the assembly. "Where is the Regent?" she asked.

"His Royal Highness," Hardi answered, "is busy with his minister the Abbé Dubois. Perhaps he will come later."

There was a moment's silence, and then Seraphica asked again, with an air of studious unconcern, "Who is the fair, fat jade who stares like a stone image?"

Master Hardi, who was now by Seraphica's side peeping through another eyehole, was again shocked.

"Hush, child, hush," he protested, "that is the lady the Regent delights to honor—that is Madame de Phalaris."

Seraphica shrugged her shoulders, still keeping her eye to the eyehole so that Master Hardi did not see her smile.

"I guessed it was she. Why is his Highness so devoted?"

SERAPHICA

It was now Master Hardi's turn to shrug his shoulders. He lowered his voice to a discreet whisper.

"Affection, habit. She knows the way to chain him. He is furiously jealous of her, and though she is as fickle as a flea, she hoodwinks him so neatly that he knows nothing. But some day there will surely be such another scrimmage as there was when he kicked out Prince Renaud of St. Pol."

"Has Prince Renaud never tried to return?" Seraphica asked, with an air of vast indifference.

Master Hardi smiled wisely, which made him look very fatuous.

"He would be mad to do so. The Regent is very dangerous when his vanity is wounded."

"I do not find Madame de Phalaris worth running a risk for," Seraphica asserted, with great truth. Then she asked, "Who are the two gentlemen, one in blue and silver, and one in crimson and gold, who stand near her and seem very assiduous?"

"He in blue and silver," said Hardi, "is the irresistible Duke of Richelieu, once smiled on by Madame de Phalaris, now smiled on no more. He in crimson is Monsieur de Canillac, captain of the King's Muskeeters, and given by the gossips as her latest favorite."

Seraphica sighed; Seraphica smiled. Her manager neither heard the one nor saw the other. "Poor Renaud," she thought, and was silent still watching the audience. One figure she recognized with pleasure, the figure of Watteau, who seemed quite at his ease among the great people, observing them and all things with his quiet smile.

The fiddlers were attacking the second part of their interlude. Master Hardi began to look impatient,

SERAPHICA

"Where is your brother?" he asked. Then, turning to the down-at-heel poor devil who served him for call-boy and prompter, he ordered, "Call Harlequin." But even as he gave the command Renaud entered, dressed as the Harlequin of the Comedy of Masks, and carrying his mask in his hand.

"You are late," said Master Hardi, severely.

Renaud did not seem to be impressed by his severity of manner.

"I am not used to this livery," he declared, with indifference.

Master Hardi surveyed him with disapproval and went to the back of the stage to make sure that the setting of the scene was in order.

Seraphica greeted Renaud in mock heroical manner.

"Indeed, brother, it becomes you amazingly, and if we were truly Columbine and Harlequin I would give you the pass of any Leander and Spavento of them all."

Renaud listened with gravity, solemn as any owl.

"Here I am at Versailles," he said, pompously, "in spite of the Regent." Then, with tardy gratitude, he added, "Thanks to you, Gillette."

Seraphica began to laugh.

"What an amusing entry we made into Paris! You on the box-seat in motley, reluctantly scattering hand-bills; I in the coach, snubbing Master Hardi, who wanted to make love to me."

Renaud felt annoyed; he knew not why. He showed annoyance with equal ignorance.

"The rascal," he declared, "he ought to be kicked."

"Perhaps," suggested Seraphica, teasingly, "you would have done the same if you had a free heart."

SERAPHICA

Renaud answered her gravely.

"If I had a free heart I could not lay it at daintier feet."

Seraphica pinked a little under her rouge. Then she grinned at him maliciously.

"I hear your lady has large feet; of course some people like large feet."

Renaud waved protesting palms.

"Do not jest at great emotions," he entreated.

"I did but jest at great feet," Seraphica answered, demurely. "Nay, I'll swear your love is perfection."

Renaud seemed a little dubious of her penitence, but at this point their colloquy was interrupted. The music was drawing to its end. Master Hardi came from the back of the stage.

"Are you ready, chatterers?" he asked.

"Ready and willing," Seraphica answered.

Master Hardi turned to the down-at-heel poor devil. "Clear, please," he commanded, with the voice, the face, the gesture of a hero. He might have been Condé on the eve of one of his great engagements. Yet, after all, it was not he who had to face the great public, to tempt their favor and risk their disdain; it was the man and the maid whom he believed to be brother and sister, whom he believed to be children of the people, and who were none of the things that he believed them to be. As for Harlequin Renaud, he accepted a disagreeable situation with indifference, because it helped him to his heart's desire, made him a pathway through the palisade of thrones that ramparted his sleeping beauty.

He believed, as Master Hardi believed, that his pretty companion was the maid of an inn. He wondered a lit-

SERAPHICA

tle how she had gained her gracious bearing, her dainty ways; but he only wondered a little, for he was a young man of few ideas, and his main idea at that moment of time was Madame de Phalaris. It exasperated him to be clad in motley, but he tamed his raging heart to necessity, and was amiable enough to feel grateful to his so-called sister for her aid. He would reward the child handsomely, he promised himself, when the play was played out. In the mean time it never occurred to him to make love to his charming accomplice, though it also never occurred to him that she would resist if he cared to throw the handkerchief. He was clearly a young man of few ideas.

The languorous music ebbed plaintively away into silence.

The heavy blows of warning sounded on the deserted stage. The blue curtains fluttered apart and revealed the fairy suburb of a fairy city, the capital of a fairy kingdom. Delicate temples with slender pillars, the shrines of exquisite goddesses, were bowered in wonderful foliage that billowed to a distant, enchanting sea. The painter, who was also a poet, had designed the scene of this fair empire; the poet, who was also a painter, had created its gallant, fantastic inhabitants. It is a thousand pities that the erudite de Secherat is not more elaborate in his description of the piece. It is a thousand pities that the piece was never printed. It is a thousand pities that the manuscript is not to be found. Perhaps de Secherat is so brief in his account because he still thought, the dry, precise man, that there was something shocking in the fact of a duchess of Bapaume actually taking part as a professional play-actress in a stage play. Certainly he

SERAPHICA

only allots a few words of meagre relation and half-hearted commendation to "Queen Columbine." Let us be content, since the matter is not to be mended, to remember that the blithe and pensive fantasy was thought beautiful by many, and, best of all to the mind of him that made the play, it was thought beautiful by Seraphica.

XXIII

HIS MAJESTY'S WISH

IF the little sickly King had been but indifferently diverted with the improvisations of "The Golden Nose" he was undoubtedly vastly delighted by the humors and the graces of "Queen Columbine." The delicate, the ascetic eroticism that ran like a fine gold thread through the silken richness of its substance was not for him, nor indeed for his elders, who took life as a very full-blooded, noisy, lewd, and merry business, and had no appreciation whatever of the attenuations, the shadings, the subtleties that brought something of the element of a mystery-play into the great, grinning comedy of life. But the simple prettiness of the story, the deliberate assertion of a nursery ideal, the demand for admiration of the rose-petal passions and chagrins of two such evanescent phantoms as Harlequin and Columbine, had a curious, faraway charm for a company that was sated with voluptuousness, jaded with excess, gorged and drunken with all the fruits and all the wines of luxury. While the little King laughed as a child should laugh at a spectacle meant chiefly for a child, those about him laughed with a laughter that recalled a wellnigh forgotten childhood. The blue curtains fluttered together again upon a triumph, and the painter's eyes smiled.

SERAPHICA

As the curtains met Louis applauded enthusiastically, and the delighted court gladly followed his example. Immediately the curtains parted and Seraphica and the still masked Renaud appeared hand-in-hand and bowed. Then the curtains fell again; but Louis still persisted in applauding, and in answer to the royal condescension Master Hardi made his appearance before the curtains.

But this was not at all what the little King wanted, and Louis impatiently protested.

"Tell the fat man to go away," he said, fretfully. "Columbine was very pretty. I want to talk to her."

Master Hardi stood stock-still with open mouth.

The Marshal Villeroy bent to address his pupil. "Sire, he whispered, "so much condescension might be misunderstood."

The little King frowned sourly and looked very much inclined to cry. Madame de Phalaris hastened to interfere in his interests. Behind her spreading fan she whispered a message to the Marshal.

"Let the lad have his way. He must learn something about us sooner or later."

As she spoke she laughed cynically. Unkind people said of her that she was ambitious to be the young King's school-mistress.

Villeroy looked at her dubiously. "Do you think the Duke would approve?" he whispered back.

Madame de Phalaris suddenly furled her fan and pointed with it in the direction of one of the alleys. "Here he is; ask him," she said.

Villeroy, following the guidance of her fan, saw the familiar form of the Regent in the distance.

By this time Louis' impatience had broken out afresh.

SERAPHICA

"I wish to see the pretty Columbine," he insisted, and drummed his red heels angrily on the grass.

Villeroy bowed respectfully.

"Here is your uncle, sire; ask him."

Louis frowned again peevishly and turned. "Always my uncle," he grumbled, in a low voice, and at that moment the Duke of Orleans joined the company.

Seraphica, peeping through an eyehole, saw a portly gentleman with a red face, who was very richly dressed and who wore a splendid diamond star on a blue ribbon. All present saluted him respectfully. He was accompanied by a small, lean, sinister figure in black, whom Seraphica had no hesitation in assuming to be the Abbé Dubois.

Madame de Phalaris, true to her adopted part of king's friend, immediately addressed the Regent.

"Monseigneur, his Majesty has a favor to ask of you," she said, and wooed the Regent with swimming eyes.

The Regent looked from the lady to the lad in some surprise.

"Indeed, sire," he asked, affectionately, "what is it?"

Louis shrugged his shoulders pettishly and kept his head averted. "Nothing, uncle," he muttered, sullenly.

Philip of Orleans gave a little sigh. His nephew's friendship was hard to win. The courtiers tried to look unconcerned. Madame de Phalaris came to the rescue.

"His Majesty," she explained, "wished to praise one of Hardi's players for her performance of Columbine."

The Regent nodded his head. "So! What do you say, friend?" And he turned to the black companion at his side.

"His Majesty's wish," said Dubois, gravely, "is the wish of all his subjects."

SERAPHICA

Philip turned towards the little theatre where Master Hardi still stood and gaped.

"Hardi," he said, "his Majesty will receive your Columbine presently."

Hardi bowed and entered the theatre.

The Regent turned to his nephew. "There, sire, are you content?"

Louis looked up at him sulkily. "Thank you, uncle," he grunted, cubbishly. As if to avoid further conference with the Regent, he ostentatiously took up a book which lay by his side on the chair and affected to read it. The courtiers drifted over the lawn in various directions, leaving the Regent and Dubois alone.

Dubois smiled ironically. "Your Highness still disciplines your nephew. Yet he is king, and will soon be crowned at Rheims."

The Regent sighed. "It were good for him to be more disciplined, but it is not easy for me to play the pedagogue. You see he does not love it." And Philip of Orleans sighed again, for he would have liked to be liked by Louis.

Dubois aimed to distract him.

"I have news from Artois," he said. "It seems quite certain that Prince Renaud left St. Pol some days ago and did not return. The presumption would be that he made for Paris."

The Regent struck his hands together angrily.

"Now, by Heaven," he protested, "if he came here again I would clap him in the Bastille, for all his prince-ship."

"And your Highness would do quite right," Dubois affirmed. "Indeed, it would be an advantage to the state to have him out of the way altogether, for then a

SERAPHICA

pretext would be found to sequester St. Pol, and we might easily choose some suitable noble to marry the Duchess Seraphica."

The Regent seemed heedless of Dubois's words. "It is impossible he could ever get here," he said, thoughtfully, "after our instructions."

He walked slowly and silently across the grass, with Dubois by his side also silent. Madame de Phalaris emerged from a side alley with the Duke de Richelieu. Madame de Phalaris saw the broad back of the Regent, and wished to rid herself of her escort.

"Duke," she said, "you are annoying. If you cling to me you will tease the Regent, who does me the honor to be very jealous of me."

"The Regent believes in you," Richelieu said, with a sneer.

Madame de Phalaris frowned a little emphatic frown, and then, remembering that frowns lead to wrinkles, banished it. "The Regent knows that my heart is wholly his. My little private friendships need not trouble him, unless they are made public."

"And our little private friendship?" Richelieu questioned, insinuatingly.

Madame de Phalaris looked at him with an ironic smile.

"Our little private friendship is peacefully ended. Past is past, and I have no affection for ghosts." She gave a little shiver as she spoke, and then a little yawn.

"Then I suppose," Richelieu suggested, "if that feather-headed fellow of St. Pol were to come to Paris—"

Madame de Phalaris shivered again.

"Dismal thought! That poor little prince of platitudes!

SERAPHICA

I would rather take you again; but in life to repeat is seldom to please. Excuse me, Duke, I see a friend."

For at that moment her gaze discovered the gorgeous musketeer de Canillac looking about him and, no doubt, in search of her.

Richelieu smiled sourly. "Monsieur de Canillac! Marquise, if you quit me to greet him you make me your enemy."

Madame de Phalaris mocked at him.

"Yet if I shun him to please you, I make him my enemy, which I do not wish."

Richelieu made her a bow.

"I am a dangerous enemy."

Madame de Phalaris glanced at him disdainfully. "Indeed," she said, and then turned to the advancing musketeer. "Monsieur de Canillac, a word with you."

The musketeer bowed, and Madame de Phalaris and Canillac walked together over the grass, leaving Richelieu by himself.

Richelieu looked after them malignly. "I mean what I say, fair lady," he murmured to himself, as he turned upon his heel.

XXIV

COLUMBINE AND KING

WHILE all this little comedy of intrigue was proceeding there was no small excitement behind the curtain of Master Hardi's theatre. Master Hardi, ebullient at the commendations accorded by the King to his newly discovered play-actress, was all for Seraphica immediately adorning herself in some robe more gorgeous than that of Columbine, of Watteau's fancy. But Seraphica, wiser and decisive, would hear of no such thing. If the King liked her as he saw her, he should see her as he liked her. She guessed readily how great a disappointment it would be to the lad if the fairy of his dawning imagination appeared to him in wholly unfamiliar trappings. When, therefore, Master Hardi, having failed in argument, tried to command, Seraphica simply gave him a stamp of the foot and a snap of the fingers, and Master Hardi was intelligent enough to perceive that there was no more to be said. He therefore offered her his hand and conducted her, with his most pompous manner heavy upon him, from the side door of the theatre on to the sward of which the courtiers formed the many-colored flowers.

The moment Seraphica made her appearance the little King, who all this time had been sulkily buried in his book of which he read no syllable, leaped to his feet.

SERAPHICA

Turning to the Regent, and pointing, as he spoke, to Seraphica, he cried:

"It is she! Oh, uncle, is she not pleasing?"

The Regent, who had just broken off the conversation with Dubois to look for Madame de Phalaris, followed the direction of his nephew's finger and observed the newcomer with interest.

Indeed, Seraphica deserved consideration at that moment. Flushed with her recent triumph, highly diverted by the complicated comedy of which she was at once author and interpreter, conscious that the costume of the Columbine of the Comedy of Masks became her mightily, she made a very pleasing picture as she advanced, herself quite untroubled, by the side of the much-flustered manager.

"Very pleasing, indeed," the Regent commented, and was then conscious of a smart stroke of a fan upon his arm and of the presence of Madame de Phalaris at his side.

The moment the play-actress had appeared upon the green, Madame de Phalaris instinctively scented danger, and quitted her musketeer to rally to her Regent, to whom she spoke sufficiently sharply.

"Very pleasing. Monseigneur, I need exercise. Pray give me your arm to the end of the avenue."

The Regent shrugged his shoulders. It was never his way to argue with women, and least of all with the woman who happened to be the reigning favorite. That lady was always to be humored, so with a smile, he offered Madame de Phalaris his arm, and rather was conducted by her than conducted her in the direction of one of the alleys more removed from the neighborhood of the theatre.

SERAPHICA

In the mean time the little King, indifferent to dignity, had run forward to greet the Columbine who had pleased him so mightily. Behind him the scattered courtiers gathered together amused, interested, and curious.

Master Hardi made his monarch a magnificent bow. "Sire, this is the lady you were pleased to praise."

The little King made Seraphica a well-trained reverence. "Mademoiselle, I wish with all my heart that my commendations could add any lustre—" Up to this point he had spoken with the stiffness of a prince who felt that the eyes of Europe were upon him. Now he became a boy again and stammered enthusiastically, "Ah, you are very pretty, mademoiselle."

Seraphica dipped him a swimming courtesy, and said, without a smile, "You confirm my judgment, sire."

There was a little pause. Master Hardi was horrified at his actress's composure, the listening courtiers were astonished and diverted. Louis seemed to take it as a matter of course, and proceeded to exert his royal prerogative of praise.

"You act adorably," he said.

Seraphica ducked again, and again faced him with smileless self-approval. "I like to be adored," she said.

A faint titter rippled along the line of listening courtiers. Master Hardi looked apoplectic and twitched nervously at Seraphica's sleeve, whispering, "Don't be so familiar with the King."

Seraphica turned upon her manager with a candid contempt. "He'd rather be treated like a human being than a doll."

Then she again faced the sovereign of France, and waited for the royal lips to speak. She really felt very

SERAPHICA

sorry for and very much interested in the little, slim, pale lad on whom so much depended or was supposed to depend. He looked delicate; he looked fretful; he was not set in a good school for youth; and yet he was in a sense, and one day would be certainly, King of France, with all such a king's possibilities for good and evil.

Artois was not a hysterically loyal province; its Flemish blood tempered French enthusiasm, but still to Seraphica her king was her king, and she found it hard to realize that the seeming fragile youth, who looked far more like a girl in boy's dress than she had done, should wear the crown.

As for Louis, he seemed to be wholly delighted to be talking with an actress, and evidently to be desirous of finding reasons for prolonging the interview.

He offered Seraphica his box of sweetmeats. "Will you have a sweet, mademoiselle," he asked, and Seraphica answered his inquiry by helping herself to several and munching them composedly.

"I love sweets," she said.

"Which do you like best?" Louis asked.

"The chocolate creams, sire," said Seraphica, as she swallowed the last of a handful.

"Is that why you have taken all of them?" he asked.

Seraphica nodded. "One can never have too much of a good thing."

Louis gave a little sigh and made a little bow. "I could never have too much of your company."

Seraphica dipped again and protested. "You will make me vain, sire. I shall change my name to Narcissa."

Louis stared at her. "Why Narcissa?" he questioned.

At this moment the Marshal Villeroy, who was wit-

SERAPHICA

nessing not altogether with approval the interview between prince and player, interposed, quite the pedagogue. "The feminine of Narcissus, sire," he explained, "a Greek youth who loved his own beauty."

Louis made a little monkey face at his beloved master. "Your are very wise," he said; "go away." Then, turning again to Seraphica, he insisted, "You have a right to be vain for you are as fair as an angel."

Villeroy was used to his pupil's ways, but he was also used to having his own way with his pupil. "Sire," he insisted, "it is time for your Majesty to retire."

Louis made a pathetic little gesture of protest. "Alas!" he said, looking lovingly at Seraphica, "I have so much to say to you." Then he turned, and, singling out of the crowd of courtiers the gorgeous presence of Monsieur de Canillac, he beckoned to him, and the splendid musketeer hastened to his sovereign's side.

Louis said to him, gravely, "Take Monsieur de Villeroy and put him to bed."

The astonished musketeer, who was never quick-witted, stared. "Your Majesty is pleased to jest," he suggested.

Louis turned to Seraphica pathetically. "It is not much good to be a king, is it," he asked, "if one has to go to bed by daylight?"

Seraphica smiled encouragingly. "Your time will shine, sire," she promised.

Louis made her a stately bow in which all the traditions of his illustrious line seemed to be incarnate. Seraphica responded by a sweeping reverence. Then reluctantly, as if he were a prisoner going to the Bastille, little Louis surrendered himself to the Marshal de Villeroy, who marched his king captive towards the palace and early

SERAPHICA

bed. After the King the courtiers streamed, the gorgeous tail of a small comet, and in a few moments the green in front of the little theatre was as tranquil and deserted as it had been in the early morning when Seraphica first met Watteau there.

XXV

A CHAT WITH MADAME DE PHALARIS

THE last to depart was Madame de Phalaris, who, having encountered Dubois in the course of her promenade with the Regent, had abandoned her royal master to his minister, and had come back to the playhouse in the hope of finding Monsieur de Canillac. As she glanced hither and thither, watching the departing groups, the curtains of the playhouse parted for a moment and a figure in the fantastic habit of Harlequin slipped out, and, coming quickly to the side of Madame de Phalaris, plucked her by the sleeve.

Madame de Phalaris gave a little start and stared at the fantastic apparition. "Who are you?" she asked.

For answer the masker plucked his black vizard from his face for an instant and then quickly resumed it. "Your slave," he said.

Madame de Phalaris gave a little gasp as she recognized Renaud. "Madman," she cried, and looked nervously about her, but no one seemed to be taking heed. She saw nothing but the colored backs of the disappearing courtiers. She did not see the Duke de Richelieu concealed behind the yew hedge of an alley spying upon her unobserved.

Renaud spoke quickly. "I must see you; come back here when all is quiet."

SERAPHICA

Madame de Phalaris paused for a second. This was a horrible imbroglio, but it seemed to her that the best way to get out of it was to agree to Renaud's suggestion. She knew his erratic temper so well that she feared some absurd ebullition on his part if she did what she would have liked to do and denied him the favor he entreated.

"Yes," she said, and turned to leave him, and immediately Renaud Harlequin disappeared behind the azure curtains and Madame de Phalaris ran swiftly over the grass and caught up with the disappearing company.

All this Seraphica had seen from behind those azure curtains; but she had also seen what neither Madame de Phalaris nor Renaud saw, that as soon as the Regent's mistress was out of sight the Duke de Richelieu came out of a side alley rubbing his hands in satisfaction, and followed in the traces of the favorite, smiling maliciously.

The open space that had been so thronged was now a solitude, and the little playhouse itself promised to become deserted in its turn. Master Hardi hurried away, following the ebbing tide of courtliness, and the actors and actresses, glad to be done with the day's business, made haste to shift their costumes and betake themselves to such pleasures as awaited them in Versailles.

Only Seraphica and Renaud lingered, Renaud for reasons which Seraphica found it little difficult to guess, and Seraphica because she was determined to watch Renaud. She waited in the women's dressing-room confident that what she expected would come to pass, and by-and-by her patience was rewarded. Peeping from the door of her room, she saw that Renaud, still habited in his masker's costume, was standing by the curtain and eagerly scanning the deserted glade through an eyehole.

SERAPHICA

"Oh, my poor Renaud!" she said to herself, in a gush of pity that was almost but not all maternal. "If I were not here to take care of you!" She advanced towards him as she thought this, and Renaud, hearing her footstep, turned to her and greeted her joyously.

"I have her promise," he cried. "She will come to me here."

Seraphica nodded wisely. "Lucky lover of a wonderful woman," she commented.

Renaud clapped his hands. "That's it. A wonderful woman. The noblest sentiments, the highest ideals. Just think, to live in the thick of this wicked court and take no stain or taint!"

Seraphica looked at him quizzically, for the young Artoisian gentleman was perfectly serious. "Then you are very happy?" she asked, in a voice that was guarded against ironic intention.

Renaud paused for a moment before answering.

"There have been times when I have felt happier. My thoughts are as vague as May, but you have been so tender a friend that I may say as much to you."

"If you are not very sure of your happiness," said Seraphica, "is it worth while to run this great risk, defying the Regent, making love to his lover—"

Renaud interrupted with an angry gesture. "No, no! Gossip! Scandal! She has never yielded to him! She told me so herself!"

"She is the best authority," Seraphica commented, grimly. Then, glancing through the eyehole, she saw a cloaked figure of a woman coming swiftly towards the theatre. Seraphica turned to Renaud. "Here she comes," she said. "Woo in peace; woo in peace." In

SERAPHICA

her thoughts she added, "I'll watch over you, simpleton." For in her heart she feared mischief from the spying Duke of Richelieu.

In another moment Renaud had passed through the parted curtains into the open air, leaving Seraphica to keep her unspoken word literally, for she followed his movements through the eyehole.

Renaud sped across the grass and met Madame de Phalaris half-way. He made as if he would take her in his arms, but to his dismay the lady repulsed him angrily.

"In Heaven's name," she cried, "why have you come here?"

Renaud did not realize that she was angry for her own sake; he fancied she feared for his safety. His soul floated at once into the ether.

"Why does the nightingale sigh for the rose, the moon-flower for the moon?"

These conundrums did not please Madame de Phalaris, and she interrupted him promptly. "I do not know and I do not care," she snapped. "It is ridiculous to come here like this after compromising me so shockingly before, and making the Regent peevish."

This time there was no mistaking the tone of her voice, and Renaud gaped at her in astonishment, much as a man walking in a brown study might gape to find that his feet had paused on the edge of a precipice.

"You are not glad to see me?" he gasped. "But our moonlight walks, our ethereal talks, love, beauty, loyalty—"

Again Madame de Phalaris interrupted him petulantly. "Oh, you are not a bad boy, and if things were different I might be pleased to see you. But things are not different."

SERAPHICA

Renaud pressed his hot palm to his hotter forehead. "What has changed you?" he wailed, and there was a world of tragedy in his question.

Madame de Phalaris shrugged her shoulders. She was not tragic; she was only cross.

"Nothing has changed me," she answered; "but I do not wish again to risk my influence with the Regent for your sake."

"With the Regent?" Renaud questioned, still in the tragic vein.

Madame de Phalaris answered him almost with a scream. "Yes, the Regent! The Regent! The Regent! Cannot you understand? Go away as fast as you can, and never come back again."

Seraphica, watching the interview from her vantage, could hear, of course, no word of what was spoken, but when she saw Renaud suddenly reel as if he had received a blow, she guessed that the lovers' meeting was not all felicity, at least for one of the lovers.

It was at this moment that she became aware that a third person was coming on the scene. The Duke de Richelieu moved lightly and quietly out of an alley and advanced towards the pair. Madame de Phalaris saw him and gave a cry of alarm, which made Renaud, whose back was turned to the intruder, instantly resume his mask.

The Duke came close to the couple and made Madame de Phalaris a profound bow.

"Forgive me," he said, sneeringly, "if I disturb a love scene, but I bear diverting news. The Duke of Orleans, with whom I felt bound to share my knowledge of your assignation, is coming here in a devil of a temper to

SERAPHICA

interrupt your mysterious interview. So, humorously enough and for the same reason, is Monsieur de Canillac. Let me add that the garden is guarded by musketeers to stay your gallant's escape. Mars and Venus were not more neatly snared in the old fable."

From her hiding-place Seraphica watched the meeting of the three, and saw Renaud make as if to strike at the new-comer; saw Madame de Phalaris restrain him, coming in between the two men; saw Madame de Phalaris make a gesture of appeal to the Duke de Richelieu. If Seraphica could not hear what was said she was nimble-witted enough to guess what was toward, and in another second she had left her post of observation and darted to the room that was used to house the wardrobe of the company.

In the mean time the three still faced one another in the lonely glade. "You are ungenerous!" Madame de Phalaris cried to Richelieu, while with out-stretched arm she kept Renaud from assailing his new foe.

Richelieu again made her a reverence. "I told you I was a dangerous enemy," he said. Then, with a mocking salutation to the pair, he turned on his heel and walked swiftly out of sight in the direction of the palace.

Madame de Phalaris turned fiercely upon her lover. "You fool!" she screamed. "You fool! See what your folly has done. Disgraced with the Regent, shamed before Monsieur de Canillac—oh, why didn't somebody kill you before you came here to ruin me!"

Renaud was all for a dignified contrition. "I meant for the best," he declared, in a broken voice. "Still, Paris is not the world; come to Artois."

SERAPHICA

He would have said more, but Madame de Phalaris did not give him time. "Artois! Artois! Do you think I want to bury myself in your dull little hole of Artois, to please you whom I once deigned to play with when there was no man to my hand?"

This time Renaud was hurt out of his folly, and became for the moment a reasonable human being.

"Say no more," he said, gravely. "I will tell the Regent that I thrust myself upon you."

"You will only be telling the truth," Madame de Phalaris answered; "but will he believe it?"

And then she gave a little scream, for it seemed to her that a second Renaud had sprung, as it were, from the earth and was standing by them. But no miracle had taken place. This second Renaud was only Seraphica, Harlequin from head to heel, clad in a costume identical with that which Renaud wore, and carrying a like mask. She touched the unhappy Renaud on the arm, and Renaud turned.

"Gillette!" he cried, in wonder.

"What has happened?" Seraphica asked. "Can you not make your escape?"

"The Duke de Richelieu has betrayed us," Renaud answered, gloomily, "and every avenue is guarded."

"I guessed as much," said Seraphica; "that is why I am here like this. Quick, into the theatre and change your gear. I will stay and bubble the Regent."

Madame de Phalaris looked at her with dislike and suspicion. "Who is this woman?" she said to Renaud.

Seraphica stopped Renaud, who was about to speak. "Be off with you," she said. "I will answer for myself."

SERAPHICA

Then, as Renaud disappeared into the theatre, she turned to Madame de Phalaris.

"I am one of the player-women, very little at your service, but I am doing a good turn to a most honest, foolish gentleman who takes a farthing rush-light for the morning star."

Madame de Phalaris frowned at this plain speaking. "You will be sorry for this," she said.

Seraphica laughed at her menace. "Unwise to quarrel with me now. I see lights through the leaves; I hear the stir of feet. You must let me pretend to woo you. I should not care a snap what happened to you, for I know you are as heartless a jill-girl as ever profaned a pretty face, and be hanged to you."

She said these last words, withal so bitter and withal so impudent, in a tone of the tenderest devotion, making Madame de Phalaris furious.

"Wretch!" she cried, but Seraphica mockingly checked her vehemence.

"Gently," she said; "here come your friends."

And as she spoke, from one of the alleys leading to the palace the Regent hurried, accompanied by Dubois, while from another Monsieur de Canillac came hot-foot, followed by Richelieu. All four men made for the seemingly loving group in the centre of the lawn. Madame de Phalaris turned and faced them, while Seraphica, still masked, rose to her feet and stood apart with averted head.

Canillac, recognizing the Regent's presence, immediately fell back, and Philip advanced furiously towards Madame de Phalaris, whom to his surprise he found awaiting his approach with perfect composure.

"So, madame," cried the Regent, "this is how you

SERAPHICA

abuse our trust in you. Who is your skulking lover? Turn, sir, and show your face."

But to this entreaty Seraphica gave no answer, and only shook her head. The Regent's anger grew. "You seem to have more shame than your brazen lady. But you shall not escape. Monsieur de Canillac, arrest that man."

As Canillac advanced to obey, Seraphica swung round, still masked, and faced the Regent. "What man?" she asked, as she pulled off the mask and thrust her laughing face close to the Regent's angry countenance. "Do not be cross with me, Monseigneur," she pleaded.

The Regent fell back astonished. "The player-woman!" he cried, and "the player-woman!" cried de Canillac, and "the player-woman!" echoed de Richelieu, no less bewildered than the Regent.

Madame de Phalaris held her head high and frowned upon the gentlemen.

"Your Highness will find it hard to win forgiveness," she said, and moved away majestically in the direction of the palace. The Regent, perplexed and irritated, eager to follow his flame but eager also to read the enigma, addressed Seraphica:

"What is the meaning of this trick?" he asked, and Seraphica answered.

"A certain duke of duplicities, trying to make mischief, has succeeded in making a fool of himself, and almost—awful thought—of your Royal Highness. Monseigneur, if the roses did not tell me that the month was June, I should think from your faces that it was the first of April."

XXVI

UN FÊTE GALANTE

THE day that followed the triumph of "Queen Columbine" was perhaps the most crowded, animated, and eventful of Seraphica's life. For the Regent, who now raved about her, insisted that the piece should be repeated as an incident of the day-long entertainment which had been organized by Watteau, and which was to realize, for four-and-twenty enchanted hours, one of those dreamlike fêtes galantes that lived in his fancy and on his canvases. Master Hardi was jubilant, so were his mummers, so, indeed, everybody seemed to be except poor Renaud, who hung his head and was secretly pitied and wept over by Seraphica, who wrestled vainly with her increasing sympathy.

Madame de Phalaris had easily persuaded her sufficiently gullible lover that the comedy of yester-eve had been specially planned for his benefit, to cure him of restless jealousy, and for the benefit of the Duke de Richelieu, to cure him of meddling and mischief-making. Indeed, the Regent was so enchanted with the divine Columbine, as he called her, that he was in a mood to swallow any tale however preposterous, and asked for nothing better than the society of the play-actress. This mood, in view of her own narrow escape, and of her to whom

SERAPHICA

she owed delivery from danger, Madame de Phalaris did not deem it advisable to cross.

An elaborate programme had been planned for a busy day. The morning was to be devoted to a fête galante. In the afternoon Watteau proposed to arrange a group of Master Hardi's players on the lawn before the theatre, that he might make a sketch of them for a picture to be presented to the King. In the evening there was to be a great ball at the palace. These were noble events enough for a single day. But it was the unexpected events that proved the most exciting.

One of the pleasantest parts of the Gardens of Versailles seemed given over to endless festival. In that part of the gardens stood the graceful building known as the Regent's Summer Pavilion, and all about it on that perfect day of perfect summer a wonderful world seemed to be called into being, a world created from ideal carnivals, a world invoked from radiantly colored canvases, a world conjured from the fantastic elements of dreams. For the moment citizens and citizenesses of that world had abandoned the gorgeous costumes of their day and moved instead in exquisite, delicate dresses designed by, or suggested by, the pencil of the painter whom the Regent was glad to call his friend. For once the adorable Arcadia which Watteau had presented in so many pictures was realized, and great lords and great ladies were content and even proud to move among the statues and the alleys of Versailles in fair-tinted, graceful garments of Watteau's imaginary kingdom. Life, for the hour, was all a Voyage to Cytherea, an endless Dance in a Colonnade. It was make-believe from first to last, but the divinest trifling when all was said and done,

SERAPHICA

Through this trifling, on this bright day, the Marshal de Villeroy and the Duke de Richelieu moved for some moments in companionship. Each had surrendered to the general impulse, or rather each had obeyed the semi-royal edict, for each was garbed after the fashion of one of Watteau's fantasies, and in an age when men were familiar with the carriage of gay colors, both wore their unfamiliar mode with cheerfulness and ease.

Richelieu brought the Marshal to a halt and pointed to the pleasant groups about them. "Truly," he said, "Watteau is the poet of clothes, the soul of modes."

The Marshal nodded, and Richelieu resumed: "His Royal Highness was wisely inspired to dedicate this Watteau fantasy to the glory of the dancing-woman."

"Yes," said Villeroy, "the Regent was rapidly enamoured. Madame de Phalaris already seems a thing of the past. It is nothing but this Columbine, here, there, and everywhere. Think of it! A dancing-woman!"

Richelieu laughed. "Yet she played him a trick, and me a trick, to please Madame de Phalaris."

Villeroy smiled sourly. "Whom she supplants?" he commented.

There was a moment's pause, and then Richelieu said, with a slight intention in his voice, "I notice that His Majesty does not grace the festival."

Villeroy shrugged his shoulders. "His Majesty is in a devil of a temper and sulks in his apartments like Achilles in his tent."

Richelieu's malign face quickened with a malign interest. "For the same, the eternal reason?"

Villeroy nodded. "The baby is lowing calf-love for

SERAPHICA

this dancing damsel, and it enrages him to find his uncle triumphant."

Richelieu made a gesture of despair. "Can dainty Columbine worship fat Philip?"

The soldier shook his head. "She teases him exceedingly, but does not yield him a finger to kiss. I would try my luck with the lady if I did not fear to vex the little King."

Richelieu spoke thoughtfully. "True, he is to be crowned betimes and might bear a grudge. Ah, here comes my enemy!"

For at that moment Madame de Phalaris, her abundant beauty seemingly somewhat ill at ease in the slender suavities of Watteau's lines, came slowly towards them. The Marshal saluted her, glanced for a moment with a roguish smile from her to the Duke, then saluting the lady turned on his heel and left the pair together.

Madame de Phalaris came close to Richelieu and spoke to him jestingly.

"You played me a naughty trick last even, yet I forgive you."

Richelieu jested back.

"You played me a naughty trick last even, yet I forgive you."

Madame de Phalaris still smiled.

"Then 'tis a clean slate on both sides. We were not made to be enemies, you and I; we are both too noble-hearted."

Richelieu looked curiously at his companion.

"You want something of me, Marquise?"

The eyes of Madame de Phalaris acquiesced.

SERAPHICA

"Win this dancing-woman away from Philip. You are irresistible, you know."

Richelieu smiled a thought fatuously. "It is not a very difficult enterprise. If I do this—?"

Madame de Phalaris gave him a look that was full of pleasant promises. "We are friends again. Ah, here comes the hussy!"

Even as she spoke the air was stirred by the sound of many trumpets, and down the wide walk which led to the door of the Summer Pavilion a quaint and comely procession was seen to move. A number of persons, clad in the costumes of the Italian Comedy of Masks, were drawing, by what seemed to be strands of white and crimson roses, a gilt, shell-shaped car, in which Seraphica, dressed as Columbine, sat enthroned. All about the car and behind the car fair Watteau people pressed eagerly, applauding, with the fickle enthusiasm of courts, her whom they believed to be the new favorite of their prince.

As the trumpets, blown by the maskers, sounded again, the doors of the Summer Pavilion opened as if by a pre-conceived signal, and the Regent, gorgeous in white satin, made his appearance in the portico, and, descending the steps, advanced to meet his favored guest.

This had been part of the day's ceremony, specially devised by the painter at once to please his master and also not a little to please himself, for his tired, alert eyes saw realities more keenly than was permitted to Villeroy or Richelieu or Madame de Phalaris, and it did not make his heart sick to waft so fair a woman towards the greeting of the Regent on a chariot of his own device, and attended by troops of fancies of his own imagining. For if he felt wistfully afraid that this Columbine was not for

SERAPHICA

him, he also felt steadily sure that she was not for the Regent, nor for any of the courtiers who aped the Regent's ways. His keen, melancholy insight persuaded him that some one occupied his Columbine's thoughts, but who it might be he could not guess, and, indeed, did not care to guess. It was enough for him that her heart was not for his winning, although he knew that she liked him, knew that he was the only man she seemed to smile on in that ugly, lustful court.

Its ugliness and its lustfulness were muffled now in gracious gear, and the procession of the triumph of Columbine was the outward sign of its temporary metamorphosis. As Seraphica's car came to halt the Regent rapidly advanced, and, giving her a hand, assisted her to descend.

"I am glad," he protested, "with all my heart to welcome divinity to my realm."

Seraphica gave the Regent a pretty bow. "Have we come to the end of our triumph?" she asked.

Philip shook his head. "No, it is but beginning. Dismiss your court, sweet Columbine."

Seraphica turned to her variegated satellites.

"Children of the Comedy of Masks," she cried, "you are free to hunt for butterflies."

The obsequious gallants and damsels vanished almost as if they had the wings of butterflies, and Seraphica was left alone with the Regent.

He made her a stately bow.

"To-day," he said, "it is you and not I who rule France."

Seraphica waved the suggestion away with her fan.

"That is a grave responsibility which I would sooner leave to you," she protested.

SERAPHICA

Philip laughed.

"France has to be governed. Does our poor festival please the Queen of Flowers?"

Seraphica looked admiration.

"Your Highness plays the noble host."

The Regent sighed and tried to look lover-like.

"Could we persuade you to remain here forever?"

Seraphica protested with a little gesture of out-pushed hands. "Your court air is too close for my gypsy spirit."

The Regent laid his hands to his heart.

"You can wish no wish that I will not gratify."

Seraphica raised her eyebrows.

"Indeed? Then I will say what Diogenes said to Alexander: 'Stand out of my sunshine!'"

The Regent assumed a very disconsolate air.

"Why do you play the prude when every courtier believes you will be what I would have you be?"

Seraphica snapped her fingers.

"A snap for their belief. I know what I am. Indeed, those who know me best do not call me prudish; but I am not one of your kind of women, Monseigneur, for the which I thank Heaven. You cannot help being what you are. But I think you are to be pitied a little—just because you do not think you need to be pitied at all. And so I give you good-day."

With that she turned away, and neither entreaties, gorgeous promises, nor veiled menaces could tempt her to remain. Her firmness astounded the Regent, but he was sufficiently wise to see that her firmness was a real thing and no sham, and in the end he was obliged to let her go and to seek consolation elsewhere. All Seraphica asked of that day was to wander about the wonderful

SERAPHICA

park and amuse herself with its new-seeming population. She was not in the least wrathful with the Regent for his overtures; that was the Regent's way. But she was tired of the Regent, and she was tired of the Regent's friends, and she wanted to be alone for the present, though there was one whom she knew in her heart she would like to have bear her company.

The pied and parti-colored legions that had attended upon her triumph were now dissipated in all directions over the lawns and swards and spaces of the noble park. Seraphica, a little weary of crowds, a little thirsty for solitude, made pensively for a retired part of the gardens. She had her cares in spite of her gayety, new cares that assailed her spirits pertinaciously; she longed to be alone and to try and know her own mind. So she drifted, thinking, to a quiet nook she had discovered where a lonely fountain trickled, in a grove that no one ever seemed to visit. She did not know that she was dogged; she did not dream that she was followed, and it was almost with a start that, when she had seated herself in her chosen isolation, she saw the Duke de Richelieu emerge from behind a tree and advance towards her with an odious smile upon his face.

XXVII

A CATASTROPHE

THE Duke made Seraphica a low bow, but there was a faint derision in his speech. "Lady, you made a fool of me last night. Make a demi-god of me to-day."

Seraphica looked at him critically, and honestly found him very repulsive. She found little to like in that glittering court, from the florid Regent at the top of the pyramid to the lowest soldier of fortune at the bottom. But Richelieu in especial had gained her heartiest aversion. She had been very curious to see him, for his fame as a lady-killer had been dinned in her ears ever since her arrival at Versailles, and she knew very well that any one of the player-women, her comrades, would gladly have given a year of their few remaining years of possible youth and comeliness to be able to say that the famous, or infamous, Duke had flung them his favor.

Seraphica was never prudish; as far as other folk were concerned she was not even very squeamish, thinking, perhaps rightly, that it is not very easy and not very wise for one wandering mortal to judge too sourly the morals of another vagrant. But there was something in this man that was strangely repellent to her out-of-doors, alive nature. He seemed the sickly, unhealthy creation of a sickly, unhealthy time, a thing begotten in slime and

SERAPHICA

battening upon slime, rather a reptile than an animal. He appeared to revel meanly in his evil reputation, to play the gallant more for the sake of all that was base in gallantry than from any virile love of the chase. The Fleming in her sickened at his smiles, and she shuddered to think that any woman could consent to his caresses. The roughest soldier of the court should make an honest wooer and carry less shame in his kisses.

Richelieu himself seemed only amused at Seraphica's keen observation of him, and waited tranquilly for the answer which at last came.

"How can I make you a demi-god?" she said, gravely. "The proposition tempts, for it suggests your removal from the fellowship of mortals."

Richelieu shrugged his shoulders.

"Let me say that I love you."

Seraphica showed no pleasure at the proposition.

"I cannot stop your tongue, but I can stop my ears."

Richelieu waved his hand as if by that action to suggest the banishing of a preposterous idea from his mind.

"'Tis impossible a girl of your spirit could love fat Philip."

Seraphica nodded.

"I do not love fat Philip, but I took you for fat Philip's friend."

Richelieu smiled pity of her simplicity.

"In matters of gallantry Damon would cheat Pythias. Do not be so simple; do not be so prim. I will give you whatever you wish for a kiss."

As he spoke he made to clasp her in his arms, for it was a favorite theory of his, often put into practice and often with success, that to come to close quarters forcibly is often the true way to triumph. But this time he was

SERAPHICA

trying his tricks on no vaporous court lady or inexperienced girl. Seraphica's clinched left hand caught him a lusty blow under the chin that for the moment staggered him, and in the same instant her right hand closed dexterously upon the hilt of his sword and drew the shining weapon from its sheath.

"I have got what I wish," she said, with a smile; "I have got a sword."

It took Richelieu some seconds to realize what had happened. His chin smarted not a little, and he stared in amazement at the spectacle of a pretty girl in gala dress holding a naked sword as if such a weapon were her familiar friend.

"What do you want with a sword?" he gasped.

And Seraphica answered: "To teach you to dance, Duke. Come, skip! Skip, I say!"

As she spoke she advanced upon Richelieu, menacing him dexterously with the point of his own sword. The Duke, unable to believe that Columbine could really handle with any success the weapon of the captain, made at first a foolish attempt or two to snatch at the blade and wrench the sword from her fingers, but the girl was infinitely too quick for him. The keen steel ever eluded his clutches, and on each of his shoulders, through his slender coat, he felt a prick that bit no more, indeed, than the prick of a pin, but which, it was plain to him, could have gone deeper home if Seraphica had so chosen.

"Are you mad?" he cried, furiously, as he reluctantly gave way before her, the shining point seeming to fly before him in a hundred places at once, and to be ready at any moment to bury itself in his person.

Seraphica only laughed the louder.

SERAPHICA

"I am pat with the small-sword, Duke, and will pink you if you do not skip like a cricket."

Red with anger, he made an attempt to rush under her guard, and was rewarded for his enterprise by a scratch on the neck which, if he had not swiftly leaped backward, would have spitted him.

"Let me warn you, Duke," said Seraphica, calmly, "that if you are not careful you will come to some hurt. Swords are nasty playthings for folk who are unfamiliar with their use."

The taunt galled, for if Richelieu was famous as a lover of ladies, he had won little fame as a fighting man, so he continued to back ignobly before Seraphica's advance, raging and spitting out rude speech, which only made Seraphica laugh the more. She urged him persistently out of the privacy of the grove towards the publicity of the park, and only allowed him to halt when she perceived some one to be approaching, who proved to be Master Hardi. Master Hardi stared in astonishment at a comedy stranger than any he had ever set upon the stage. "What on earth are you doing?" he asked, bewildered. He could not for a moment conceive that Seraphica would presume to take liberties with so illustrious a personage as the Duke de Richelieu. It must, therefore, be by the Duke's good pleasure that the entertainment was going forward, yet the Duke did not seem pleased, and the expression on his staring face was not pleasant. Seraphica, never pausing in her sword-play, greeted her manager with a delighted smile as she answered him.

"I am teaching the Duke some new dancing steps. I think he has learned his lesson."

SERAPHICA

Then she stopped in her sport, and taking the sword in both hands she stooped and swiftly snapped its blade across her knee, and flung the pieces on the grass at the Duke's feet.

"You have never broken a sword in war, Monseigneur," she said, "but you can make a fable about these fragments. Play deep, to-night, Duke; you know the proverb."

Master Hardi said nothing; he was too amazed for speech. Richelieu, very pale, stooped and picked up the fragments of his sword. He looked for a moment as if he would like to fling himself upon Seraphica, but her coolness and the memory of her strength daunted him, and the presence of a third person, even though the third person were only Master Hardi, was embarrassing after what had happened. He gave Seraphica a look of hate.

"You are a termagant!" he said, and then turned his back upon her and walked away a defeated rake, with his broken sword for ignominious trophy.

So long as Richelieu was in sight Master Hardi was deprived by astonishment of the power of speech, but the moment the Duke had disappeared he seemed to find his tongue, and turning to Seraphica said, in a tone in which horror blended with astonishment:

"What are you doing?"

Seraphica laughed.

"Punishing an impertinent. No more of him. Where is my brother? I have not seen him since last night."

Master Hardi wagged his head knowingly. "He is in the theatre," he answered. "I don't know why he hides there when he might be amusing himself. Versailles

SERAPHICA

should be a pleasant place for the brother of the favorite."

Seraphica caught at his last words sharply. "The brother of—?" she said, as if she were not quite sure that she had heard her manager aright.

Master Hardi bowed very respectfully. "The Regent's favorite," he repeated. "I am as pleased as if I were your father. Indeed, even if I had been what, I may frankly tell you, I at one time hoped to be, your own favored suitor, I should still be pleased. Of course I recognize at once that nothing of the kind is possible for me now—for the present, that is, for the present. I congratulate you upon your rapid advance in fortune. It really seems too beautiful to be true."

Seraphica looked at her congratulator with steady, menacing eyes, and her voice was ominously calm as she repeated his last words with a slight variation. "Much too beautiful to be true," she said, quietly, and then, in a sudden fury, she pounced upon Master Hardi, and seizing him by both his shoulders in her strong, young hands, she shook him till his fat body quivered and his fat face flamed, while she screamed at him: "You horrid old man! Do you dare to think that I am the Regent's favorite?"

Then she let go of him and pushed him away from her and glared at him.

It was a morning of astonishments for Master Hardi, and he tried to articulate his surprise.

"But the Regent's eyes when he looks at you," he gasped. "But the Regent's voice when he speaks to you. But the Regent's praises. What do all these mean?"

Seraphica's anger had passed now; the sudden storm

SERAPHICA

had changed to the habitual sunshine. She laughed. "These things mean nothing, just nothing. The Regent is not the only man in Versailles to make sheeps' eyes, or to speak in a foolish voice, and I give you my word of honor that he will never be my man."

With that she turned on her heel and ran as fast as she could towards the theatre.

But in spite of Master Hardi, Renaud was not in the empty theatre, and Seraphica sat for a while the thoughtful tenant of its emptiness to resume those reflections which the malapert, maladroit Duke had interrupted. She was weighing some words which she and Renaud had changed that very morning after the repeated performance in the theatre. The talk had been talked during the few moments in which they stood together on the stage waiting to appear in "Queen Columbine." Renaud had seemed preternaturally gloomy, and Seraphica had rallied him upon his manner. He had listened solemnly to her banter, eying her the while with questioning eyes. Then there was a brief silence, and Renaud had suddenly blurted out, "Gillette, I have been thinking."

There had been perhaps a little bitterness in Seraphica's smile as she commented, "And the top of your thoughts is 'adorable Madame de Phalaris'?"

Renaud had frowned. "Madame de Phalaris is—what she is. Oh, I have been a fool, Gillette."

This time Seraphica had laughed heartily.

"Was your love-moon made of green cheese? Well, if you are no longer in love with the lady, the sooner you leave Paris the better."

She recalled how wistfully Renaud had looked at her

SERAPHICA

and how gravely he had spoken. "Though I no longer love one, it does not follow that I am not in love."

Seraphica had lifted her brows interrogatively.

"Can Cupid rekindle your cold heart so quickly? Who is the Phoenix?"

Renaud had sighed. "Can you not guess?" he had asked, sadly.

Seraphica had hazarded a guess.

"Madame d'Estrées, with her yellow hair, blue eyes, and droll Provençal accent?"

Renaud had wagged his head decisively. "It is not Madame d'Estrées."

Again Seraphica had questioned. "The adorable Madame de Sabran?"

And again Renaud had denied. "It is not Madame de Sabran."

Seraphica remembered that she had paused for a moment before she made a fresh suggestion. "Madame de Parabère, whom the Regent calls his little black crow?"

Renaud had now become monotonous in denial. "It is not Madame de Parabère."

At this denial Seraphica had protested that she could not guess through the catalogue of court beauties.

Then Renaud spoke as one who takes his courage in both hands for an effort. "I would serve no court beauty, but a true woman whose good opinion is nobler to gain than the Golden Fleece, whose disdain were the worst of dooms—a friend, a comrade, an angel—"

Seraphica had looked astonishingly innocent. "She must be a remarkable young woman," she had suggested. And then had come the signal for the play to begin, and she and Renaud had spoken no more together. But his

SERAPHICA

words burned in her memory and she searched her heart. She had sat for perhaps an hour in the deserted play-house when her reverie was interrupted by the hurried entrance of Master Hardi.

Master Hardi was purple with excitement. "Here is a pretty kettle of fish!" he shouted to her.

Seraphica stared. "What is the matter?"

Hardi explained. "That cursed brother of yours has tried to murder the Regent."

Seraphica was startled, was incredulous. "Nonsense!" she said.

Master Hardi was positive. "I have just met a party of musketeers conveying him to the guard-house."

Now Seraphica was alarmed. "The dev—I mean, dear me! This were the moment to sink in a swoon, but 'twere a waste of time. I must speak with the Regent at once." And leaving Master Hardi gaping, she quitted the theatre and hurried to the Regent's pavilion. On the threshold she met Madame de Phalaris, who was leaving the Regent's company.

When Seraphica saw her coming she advanced to her and stopped her. "Tell me what has happened," she asked, imperiously.

Madame de Phalaris answered, malignly, "The player you call your brother attempted the Regent's life, and will be sent to the Bastile."

Seraphica resolved to make an appeal to her on the chance that there might be some goodness in her.

"I did you a good turn yesterday; do me one to-day. Win this man's pardon."

Madame de Phalaris looked curiously at her.

"Do you know who he is?"

SERAPHICA

Seraphica answered, briefly, "I know that he loved you."

Madame de Phalaris pretended a little yawn.

"Save him for yourself. I am glad to be quit of him."

Seraphica looked at her scornfully. "You are—" she began, and then paused. What she meant to say was not polite, and she amended it. "You are—what you are."

Madame de Phalaris's face flushed, and she raised her fan as if she meant to strike Seraphica, but Seraphica's look and words restrained her: "If you touch me I will box your ears royally, for my fingers tingle."

Madame de Phalaris lowered her fan.

"You will find it hard to fish your lover from the Bastile. You will not find the Regent very forgiving."

At this moment the Regent appeared, and Madame de Phalaris turned to him.

"Monseigneur, this woman is pleading for her—brother."

She swept away disdainfully, and Philip advanced towards Seraphica and questioned her. "You come to me. Has disdain changed her mind?"

Seraphica pleaded, "Set him free."

The Regent smiled significantly.

"I could be kind to the brother were the sister not so cold to me."

Seraphica protested.

"You know he is not my brother."

The Regent persisted.

"I know that he passes as your brother, though he is probably your lover. Nothing shall persuade me to the contrary except a love-change in you. Is it a brisk bargain?"

SERAPHICA

Seraphica denied him vehemently.

"'Tis a base bargain, and I will not shake hands on it."

The Regent made a gesture of resignation.

"If you change your mind before to-night your—brother—shall go free. If not, be ready to see how black becomes you."

In uttering which menace the Regent, indeed, meant no more malice than to tease the play-actress who had defied him. But Seraphica was resolved to act as if true danger was masked by his vague threat.

XXVIII

A KNIGHT CHALLENGER

THIS is what had happened. Renaud, though the mood of his heart was so strangely changed, still nourished feelings of resentment against the Regent for what he held to be his ungentlemanly conduct, and still yearned to call him to account. He took advantage, therefore, of the festal with its freedom and its license of disguise, to shadow his enemy and to seek his opportunity. He disguised himself in a costume borrowed from Master Hardi's wardrobe, the costume of the blustering, fire-eating Captain Fracassa, a costume which he chose because it carried with it the privilege of wearing a sword.

Thus accoutred, Renaud drifted hither and thither on that day of gayety, waiting upon chance. And chance carried him on the track of the Regent, walking alone and moody in an alley near the pavilion, digesting as best he might the disdain of Seraphica. Here was the moment Renaud had long hungered for; time had been kind and yielded him his wish.

Renaud advanced towards the Regent, and, standing before him with folded arms, contemplated him fixedly. The Regent, for all his habitual coolness, could not restrain a little start of surprise at being so suddenly con-

SERAPHICA

fronted by this somewhat astonishing figure. Indeed, so much was he amazed by the apparition in the fantastic habit of Fracassa, that he did not for some instants realize that the man in the mountebank's garb was the young Artesian gentleman who had had the impertinence to be his rival for the graces of Madame de Phalaris.

With a very stern voice, and with a carriage which he conceived to be little less majestic, Renaud addressed the Regent. "Philip of Orleans, I challenge you to fight, I, Renaud of St. Pol."

Now the Regent recognized his visitor, but Philip had quite recovered his composure. The intrusion of the unexpected figure had brought to the Regent's mind the ever-present possibility of an attempt at assassination. There need be no such apprehension now, and it was with perfect serenity that he questioned, "Are you mad, sir, that you mountebank it thus in my gardens?"

Renaud's bearing was more lofty than ever.

"We are peers; we are princes; you cannot deny me."

The Regent eyed him with a strained amusement, drew a golden snuffbox from his pocket, and helped himself to a pinch.

"And yet, you see, I do deny you."

Renaud dangled by a finger one of the gauntleted gloves of Fracassa.

"Shall I fling my glove at the feet of a gentleman or throw it in the face of a coward?"

The Regent was beginning to be annoyed. This young amorist and firebrand was proving tiresome, and Philip had no desire to flatter his foeman's vanity and imperil his own life by crossing swords with him.

"Sir," he said, "you are, if you will forgive me for

SERAPHICA

saying so, a very foolish young man, and at this moment you cut, if I may be permitted to make the suggestion, a very ridiculous figure. You are presuming too much upon my tolerance and my good-nature, and yet I am prepared to give a further proof that I am tolerant and that I am good-natured. I will give you twelve hours in which to leave Paris. If at the end of that time you are still in the capital, I will send you to the Bastile."

While the Regent was speaking he caught a glimpse, at a little distance, of a feather floating in the air and a gleam of sunlight upon steel. He gave a little sigh of relief. It was de Canillac with his musketeers going his rounds. Renaud was unaware of their neighborhood, unaware of the reason for the Regent's smile of satisfaction; he was only aware that he was face to face with his enemy and must needs have it out with him.

"Philip of Orleans," he cried, "there lies my gage," and he flung his glove at the Regent's feet. "Take up my challenge." And he drew his sword.

The Regent's answer was to raise his voice and to call loudly: "Canillac, help! Canillac, to me!"

Renaud, taken by surprise, had barely time to ejaculate an astonished "Monseigneur," when Canillac and his soldiers, startled by the Regent's summons, came running at full speed to the scene. A sudden thought of vengeance entered the Regent's mind, inspired by that faint apprehension of assassination which had seized him when Renaud first made his appearance. He pointed now to Renaud, standing before him with his sword drawn, and said, composedly, "I think that man meant to assassinate me."

Instantly half a dozen musketeers flung themselves

SERAPHICA

upon the indignant Prince of St. Pol, wrenched his weapon from his grasp, and held him firmly pinioned in spite of his desperate resistance.

Renaud shouted at the Regent, "You lie, Monseigneur, you lie." Then he made a wild appeal to his captors. "Gentlemen of the musketeers, I challenged this most ungentle gentleman—"

But here the Regent interrupted him. "He came at me unawares, and drew a sword. Take him to the guard-room, and keep him in close confinement."

Renaud protested.

"You dare not do this. Renaud of St. Pol is the peer of Philip of Orleans."

The Regent was imperturbable.

"Belike; but you are no such man. You flutter a great name as a fool flutters a feather, but the trick shall not save you."

Renaud gasped at this audacity, and for a moment his power of action seemed paralyzed. Then he thought of a chance and turned to the captain of musketeers.

"Monsieur de Canillac," he cried, "we are old acquaintances. You know who I am."

The Regent also turned to the captain of musketeers and spoke with emphasis.

"Do you know this fellow?"

Canillac hesitated a moment, and then said, decisively: "No, Monseigneur."

Renaud looked scorn at him.

"Your servility should not wear a sword. Ah, here is one who will speak!"

For even as he spoke Madame de Phalaris, wandering at ease, had caught sight of the group of musketeers and,

SERAPHICA

wondering what had happened, had hurried to the spot. Seeing the Regent, she ran to his side with the cry: "Philip, what has happened? Philip, are you hurt?"

The Regent pointed disdainfully at Renaud.

"A madman tried to attack me."

Renaud appealed to Madame de Phalaris.

"Marquise, for the old sake's sake, will you tell his Highness who I am?"

The Regent also addressed the lady.

"This impostor claims to be Prince Renaud of St. Pol. I do not recognize him; Monsieur de Canillac fails to recognize him; do you recognize him, madame?"

Madame de Phalaris looked fixedly at the prisoner with a little, cruel smile.

"I knew the Prince you speak of very slightly; I do not remember that he bore any resemblance to this person."

Renaud grew very pale. "Lady, is this well done?" he asked.

The Regent shrugged his shoulders.

"An impostor like you is best out of the way. The Prince you counterfeit would never have forced his forbidden way to us; but had he done so he would have merited your lesson. To the guard-room with him, Monsieur de Canillac."

Renaud glared at the Regent. "Dastard!" he cried.

He had no time to cry more. The musketeers closed in upon him, and, accompanied by Monsieur de Canillac, hustled him away.

XXIX

AN APPEAL TO THE KING

WHEN Seraphica found that her appeal to the Regent's clemency was unsuccessful, she resolved to play a bold stroke and appeal to the King. Though he was but king in name as yet, if she could win a pardon from him it might prove a potent talisman. Louis had sulked in the palace all day, so to the palace Seraphica now ran, and, making her way to the boy monarch's apartments, demanded audience boldly. As Seraphica was now generally believed to be an important person at court, Lafleur, the King's body-servant, was immediately sent for, and Lafleur readily consented to conduct Seraphica to the presence.

The little King was playing with a cup and ball, and looking very peevish and discontented over his sport. He moved slowly forward, taking no notice of Seraphica, who advanced and made him a courtesy.

"Sire," she said, with entreaty in her voice.

But Louis still took no notice, so Lafleur advanced discreetly.

Lafleur was one of those who always think it well to be friendly with a possible favorite. "Sire," said Lafleur, "the young lady."

"What young lady?" the little King asked, crossly,

SERAPHICA

and then affected to see Seraphica for the first time. "Ah, the Columbine lady. You may wait within call, Lafleur."

Lafleur bowed and retired.

Louis continued: "There's the only friend I have in the world, Lafleur, my servant. He does as I wish, so I've promised him a pretty pension when I lay hands on the exchequer."

"You are cynical, sire," said Seraphica.

Louis frowned. "Why shouldn't I be cynical? You spend your time with my uncle instead of with me, though I am ever so much nicer than my uncle. Oh, I am very cross with you."

Seraphica gave a little wail of despair. "This is heart-breaking news when I hoped to find you all kindness."

Louis looked cunning.

"Oh, you have a favor to ask."

Seraphica explained.

"An act of justice. One of our players, sire, has had the misfortune to displease the Regent, and the Regent threatens to send him to the Bastile."

"What has the fellow done?" Louis asked.

And Seraphica answered him, aptly, "He thought, sire, as you think, that the Regent took up too much of my time."

Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"I am sorry for him, but I can't help him."

Seraphica protested.

"You can, sire. You are, in fact, the King. The prerogative of mercy rests with you. Two lines of your hand of write will set the prisoner free."

Louis looked impatient.

SERAPHICA

"Don't plague me. Did I tell you my parrot had the pip?"

Seraphica sighed.

"I grieve for the royal bird. My friend—"

Louis continued his own complaints.

"And that devil of a Dubois wants to betroth me to a Spanish brat."

Seraphica tried to interrupt. "My friend, sire—"

Louis reproved her with a glance.

"You are a gadfly. What do I care for your friend. Can he cure my parrot? Will he marry the Spanish brat?"

Seraphica spoke fervently. "I hope not."

A sudden thought seemed to strike Louis.

"You have amused my uncle all the morning; now amuse me. I am bored to death. I want to forget myself, to be made to smile, to be made to cry—"

Seraphica saw her way to a bargain.

"Sire, if I make you smile, if I make you cry, will you give me my prisoner?"

Louis looked at her suddenly.

"You are persistent. Yes, if you can succeed."

He flung himself sulkily into a chair and resumed his cup and ball.

Seraphica clasped her hands together. "What can I do?" she said to herself. "What can I do?" Then suddenly she turned to the little King. "Sire, shall I tell you a story?"

Louis nodded. "If you like."

Whereupon Seraphica began, like the lady in the Arabian tale:

"There was once a king whose daughter was so lovely

SERAPHICA

that princes and peers risked life for her smile, and painters made her famous till the Sophy of Persia and the Grand Mogul were as keen to win her as any Paladin. But she cared for none of her suitors, ever seeking more grace of body, more comeliness of visage, than they had to show. Her sire had a jester as hideous as she was fair, as twisted as she was straight, and it pleased Heaven to let the ugly fool fall in love with the beautiful maiden. This madness came to the king's ears, who ordered the fool to be hanged. Then said the fool, 'If I must swing, let me choose my tree, for the best part of being hanged is to pick one's own gibbet.' The king consented and went with him into the forest, but no tree pleased the fool. This was too high, that too low, this too gloomy, that too gay. At last the king, seeing they would walk in the woods till doomsday, gave him his life for his cunning."

As the tale had been going on, Louis' interest had increased, and when it came to an end he condescended to give a little tired laugh. "The rogue deserved his grace," he admitted.

Seraphica clapped her hands exultingly.

"Sire, you have smiled. I have gained half my pardon."

Louis looked cunning.

"You have more to do. You cannot make me cry for a fool's tale."

"We shall see," said Seraphica, and began again: "The fool was banished, and men forgot him. But the girl's pride grew with her beauty till at last a rejected prince waged war upon her father. The invader besieged the king and his daughter in their last stronghold. All

SERAPHICA

seemed lost, when from some corner came a scarecrow in rusty armor riding a gaunt horse, and by his gallant speech put such spirits into the besieged that they followed him to a sortie and overthrew the enemy."

Seraphica made a pause, and Louis questioned eagerly, "Was the scarecrow the jester?"

"Yes, sire," said Seraphica.

Louis questioned again, "Well, what happened?"

Seraphica took up her tale.

"In the fight the fool was wounded to the death, and they bore him on a bier to the king and the fair maid. And the weeping king asked the dying fool if there were any way to reward him, and the fool said, 'Let your daughter kiss me on the lips before I die.' Then she came forward willingly, for she was grateful, and leaned to the fool's lips. Perhaps the light of Heaven was in his eyes, but even then his face showed so hideous that the girl shrank back and could not give her lips to it. The gray face of the fool grew grayer, and those about heard him sigh, 'Too ugly.' And on that sigh he died."

Louis covered his face with his hands as he muttered, "Poor, faithful fool!"

Seraphica triumphed. "There are tears in your eyes, sire."

Louis sprang to his feet. "Witch, you have won. Quick! I will write a release for your friend at once, while my uncle's back is turned."

Seraphica applauded him.

"Sire, it is good that your first royal act should be an act of mercy."

XXX

IN THE KING'S NAME

POPELIN DE SECHERAT, anxious that no cloud should sully the character of his admired Philip of Orleans, explains at perhaps unnecessary length that the Regent had never at any time the intention to send Renaud of St. Pol to the Bastile. All he desired was to give a tiresome young gentleman a fright—in which, however, he failed, for Renaud was not frightened—and to teach him a lesson he had partially learned already of the vanity of court friendships. But he thought it would do Renaud no harm to cool his head as well as his heels for a while in the darkness of the guard-room prison. Towards this same guard-room, after a little while, the Regent directed his steps, intending to give orders that his captivity should be made a light one. What was the Duke's astonishment when, on arrival at his destination, he found that his nephew had preceded him, and was flourishing a signed order of release in the face of the astonished Monsieur de Canillac, who was really at a loss how to act, and hailed the advent of the Regent with a joy that was not shared by little Louis. The Regent took the order from the trembling fingers of his nephew, read it through, and realized, it may be, that this afforded him a way out of a difficult situation.

SERAPHICA

"Your clemency, sire," he said, gravely, "shall be carried into effect. Pray return to your apartments, where I shall have the honor to wait upon your Majesty presently."

The timid, bewildered little King retired, astonished at the result of his intervention, and hurried back, at once elated and alarmed, to the palace where Seraphica was waiting for him.

Though the little King entered the room apparently a prey to great agitation, Seraphica was, however, so much absorbed by her own purposes that, regardless of the patent perturbation of the boy, she rushed forward to him, asking anxiously, "Is he free?"

The young King assumed the most royal frown, and answered, petulantly: "Of course he is free. You think only of him. Think a little of your king."

What that king said was perfectly true, and Seraphica admitted it readily enough. "Sire," she began, "I am most grateful, but—"

At this point the boy interrupted her. "You have got me into a terrible scrape. My uncle is in a devil of a temper."

It was plain from the expression on the little King's face, and the nervousness which shook the little King's body, that he by no means enjoyed the prospect of his Regent uncle's irritation. Seraphica felt instantly anxious, but not, alas, for the King.

"He will not revoke the order?" she questioned, eagerly.

Louis flung himself angrily into a chair. "Your pet is safe enough, for my uncle has backed my word with his; but my uncle tells me he is going to visit me at once.

SERAPHICA

He means to give me a wiggling—and I hate being wigged. When his red face flames at me, and his big voice blusters, I become so frightened that I feel inclined to cry.”

And, indeed, at that moment there were tears in the King’s voice and tears in the King’s eyes, and he looked very unlike a future ruler of men.

Seraphica felt it her duty as a good subject to recall her monarch to himself.

“You are king, sire,” she said, softly.

Louis pouted like a spoiled child as he was.

“It’s all very well to say ‘you are king’ so glibly. I say that to myself whenever my uncle summons me, but when I hear his footsteps my kingship sinks to the heels of my shoes.”

Seraphica’s glance descended for a moment to the diamond buckles of the royal red-heeled shoes; then she said, thoughtfully: “I wish I were in those shoes for the next ten minutes; I’d read your excellent uncle such a lesson!”

Louis turned to her eagerly. “I wish to Heaven you were. Have you ever played a man’s part?”

Seraphica smiled as her mind travelled back to the masculine beginning of her Odyssey. “Once,” she answered, and saw herself again in the long, gray riding-coat and long, slim boots.

Louis stared at her, and there was a sudden hope in his eyes. “Did you play it well?” he asked.

And Seraphica nodded, with an air of infinite satisfaction, “Very well.”

Louis’ hope seemed to be taking a decisive form in his mind. “Then why can’t you dress up as me and fool my uncle?”

SERAPHICA

The fancy tickled Seraphica, and she dandled it for a moment, almost anxious to put it into practice. Then she shook her head reluctantly. "I could do it well enough; I could mimic your voice and all, but there isn't time for the masquerade. The Regent will be here too soon."

Louis turned an offended shoulder to her and said, pettishly: "You are a pretty friend. I did you a service, and now you deny me one."

But Seraphica had been thinking, and on her thoughts she spoke. "No, I don't. I see a way to help you, if you'll do exactly as I tell you."

Louis was all friendliness and hope again as he asked, quickly, "Yes, yes; what is it?"

Seraphica's immediate answer was to give her royal master a command. "Help me to move this settee," and she pointed to a great gilded settee, richly upholstered in brocade, which stood against the wall. It was a very large and cumbrous piece of furniture with a very high back. The King, obeying his companion without question, lent the aid of his feebleness to Seraphica's strength, and the pair between them moved the settee from its station against the wall and pushed it towards the middle of the room, at such an angle that its back was turned towards the door by which the Regent, if he came to pay the dreaded visit to his nephew, must needs enter.

Louis assisted Seraphica in this manœuvre in silence, but it was plain from the expression on his face that he could not in the least understand its purpose. Seraphica saw his perplexity and proceeded to enlighten him.

"Sire, you must stand so, with your back to this settee"

SERAPHICA

—and she placed him as she spoke—“so that your face will be in shadow. I will crouch here and play your prompter. You must repeat every word I whisper, and I think we will make your uncle skip.”

The little King shook his head violently. Though the school-boy in him was fascinated by the proposed trick, his dread of an angry uncle evidently dominated his desire for mischief.

“I’m afraid. It’s a great risk.”

Seraphica was quick to encourage him.

“Not if you stand firm and speak steady. I’ll fling you the phrases to wing him. ’Tis this or nothing, and if we win, to-day makes you truly king.”

Her calmness and assurance seemed to pour the strong wine of self-confidence into the King’s frail body. His cheeks flushed and his eyes flashed as he cried, “Now, by St. Louis, you inspirit me.”

Seraphica clapped her hands. “Have a bold carriage,” she said. “Keep saying to yourself, I am king, I shall be king, I will be king. It only needs a little spirit to bring Regent Philip to reason. When I say your parting speech, go; but be at hand, your uncle needs watching.”

Louis’ smiling face grew suddenly serious and his flushed cheeks paled. He laid a trembling finger upon trembling lips. “Hush! Here he comes,” he said, and again there was terror in his eyes.

Seraphica caught at both his hands. “Courage!” she cried; “courage, my King!”

“We shall be found out,” he whimpered.

Seraphica laughed at the idea. “If we are found out,” she said, “it will be all my fault, and I alone shall be

SERAPHICA

blamed for it, so that need not trouble you. But we shall not be found out, if only you will remember your kingship, sire."

As she spoke she hurriedly made Louis lean against the back of the settee, facing the door whose handle was already turning on the Regent's touch. Seraphica skipped nimbly round to the other side of the settee, and crouched against its cushions, with her head uplifted to whisper the oracular words into the ears of her reluctant priest. Still, Louis looked bold enough as he leaned against the gilded wood-work, with his arms folded and his hat pulled over his eyes, in an attitude of defiance as the door was thrown open and the Regent entered the room.

There was some show of anger on the Regent's face, and a great show of anger in the Regent's manner as he spoke loudly. "This is a pretty road to go, sire, pardon my prisoners without consulting me."

Behind his back Louis could hear Seraphica whispering very softly to him the words, "Don't shout, uncle," and these words Louis, not a little to his own astonishment, found himself repeating loudly and firmly—"Don't shout, uncle."

To say that the Regent was astonished is to give but a faint and half-hearted picture of his amazement. Had he been faced by a cat or lectured by a lap-dog he could scarcely have seemed more surprised.

"What!" he gasped, his ruddy face suddenly ruddier.

Seraphica, conscious of advantage, pressed her point quickly. Again she whispered, "Once for all, you must mend your manners in our presence."

And again Louis repeated, in a tone of manly com-

SERAPHICA

mand, "Once for all, you must mend your manners in our presence."

So far the Regent had stood on the threshold of the door, fixed into rigidity by wonder, but his growing anger restored to him mobility, and he moved towards his nephew with menace in his voice and in his mien. "Do you dare, boy, to address me like this?" he cried, in a tone that would certainly have crushed all courage out of Louis, if Louis had been alone. But Louis was not alone; his faithful ally was behind him, and his faithful ally quickly countered the Regent's attack by whispering, "If you approach, I shall call for help."

Instantly Louis repeated her words, "If you approach, I shall call for help."

He spoke these words with so much blustering assurance that the Regent not merely stopped in his advance, but drew back again with a gasp of surprise.

Again Seraphica pressed her advantage. "I shall say you tried to kill me," she whispered, and Louis loudly repeated, "I shall say you tried to kill me."

Philip of Orleans seemed as if he might fall, and he leaned against the table for support.

"Ah, sire," was all he could say, in indignant and pathetic reproach, for he knew only too well how many there were who would eagerly believe such a statement.

Seraphica, remembering how the Regent had served Renaud—she had heard of it from Hardi, who had it from Canillac—had no immediate pity for his grief. Again she whispered to Louis, "Your own trick, Monseigneur," and again Louis rumbled the false thunder, "Your own trick, Monseigneur."

The Regent made an effort to recover his composure.

SERAPHICA

"Oh, I will listen to you no longer," he said, and made as if to quit the apartment.

But Seraphica was not willing that he should so depart, and again she prompted her accomplice, "Yes, Philip of Orleans, you will listen to your king."

Louis repeated the prompting, "Yes, Philip of Orleans, you will listen to your king," and the Regent, with his hand upon the handle of the door, paused in obedience to that authoritative speech.

Again Seraphica whispered, "I may be a boy in years, but from to-day you will find me a man in spirit."

Yet again Louis played the royal parrot. "I may be a boy in years, but from to-day you will find me a man in spirit."

Philip could not believe his ears, could not believe his eyes. What had happened to make his timid, fretful, childish nephew so suddenly put on the bearing of a royal man.

Seraphica gave him little time to let his wonder cool. Once more she whispered, "When, in a little while, I am consecrated at Rheims, they will put the crown of the Capets on the head of one who knows how to rule." And once more Louis played his part. "When, in a little while, I am consecrated at Rheims, they will put the crown of the Capets on the head of one who knows how to rule."

The Regent bowed his head. Whatever had inspired his nephew to this show of daring, at least nothing would be gained by openly defying him, and denying the authority which many in the kingdom would be glad to see him assume.

"Yes, sire," he said, and made a grave salutation to his sovereign.

SERAPHICA

Again Seraphica whispered, "Be pleased to remember this, my uncle—and subject," and again Louis repeated: "Be pleased to remember this, my uncle—and subject."

The Regent bowed his head. "I shall remember, sire."

From behind the settee a last phrase of Seraphica's floated to Louis' ears, "I leave you to deal honorably with the gentleman you have wronged."

Louis spoke with the same cool composure that he had worn during the whole interview. "I leave you to deal honorably with the gentleman you have wronged."

Then he gave his uncle a haughty salutation, to which the Regent responded by a deep reverence, and Louis quitted the apartment.

Seraphica, curled up on the settee, was quivering with infinite amusement and smiling with delight. The bewildered Regent seated himself at the great table and mused.

"What has come to the lad?" he asked himself. "He carried himself like a son of France. Who urged him to this—Villeroy, Richelieu, Dubois? Well, he has shaken himself free of my leading-strings, and I must be content to play second fiddle."

He leaned forward and touched a bell that stood upon the table. A musketeer entered from the antechamber. The Regent asked, "Has Monsieur de Canillac arrived from the guard-house?"

The musketeer answered, "He has just arrived, Monseigneur."

"Let him bring his prisoner here at once," the Regent ordered.

The musketeer saluted and left the room. When he was alone the Regent smiled, somewhat maliciously.

SERAPHICA

"My rival must go free," he muttered; "but I think I can sting him a little before he goes."

Seraphica sat up, and rubbing her hands delightedly, and saying to herself, "I really believe I am helping to make history," peered round the edge of the settee to get a peep at the baffled Regent, but hurriedly drew back her head again as the door of the antechamber opened and Canillac entered followed by Renaud.

As soon as he was in the room the Regent spoke.

"Good-evening, Monsieur Billaut," he said.

As he spoke he made a gesture of dismissal to Canillac, who went out into the antechamber.

Renaud turned furiously towards the Regent. "Philip of Orleans, I am Renaud of St. Pol."

The Regent smiled protestingly. "You persist in your pleasantry, play-actor! Well, you are free. Lovely lips sued for your liberty."

Renaud bit his lip. "Do I owe freedom to the Marquise de Phalaris?"

The Regent shook his head. "No, sir; the Marquise is not interested in stage players. It was your Columbine of Columbines who pleaded for you, and, indeed, her arguments were irresistible."

Renaud looked curiously at him. "What do you mean?"

The Regent produced his snuffbox and helped himself elaborately to a pinch. When the process was over he said: "If you were one of us, you would know that gentlemen may not boast of a lady's favors. Even a player-woman's graces are sacred."

The innuendo was so plain that Renaud could not mistake it, and he challenged it angrily. "Do you dare assert—?"

SERAPHICA

The Regent flicked a particle of snuff from one of his ruffles. "I assert nothing; remember that, I assert nothing. A pretty woman prayed for your liberty. I adore pretty women, and you are free. You may or may not draw inferences. The point is, you are free."

Renaud gave him one word. "Liar!" he cried, and his voice shook with rage.

But the Regent seemed imperturbable and unoffendable. "Indeed you are free. Open that door and you walk forth unchallenged."

Renaud came a little nearer to the Regent and spoke slowly. "The woman you slander is only a player, but I will swear to her honor. I came to France to fight you. I leave France knowing that you are not worth fighting with."

At that moment Seraphica's pretty head appeared above the carved and gilded back of the settee on which she was kneeling, and she interrupted the conference of the astonished gentlemen by clapping her hands vigorously as she cried, "Well said, Prince, well done."

The Regent gasped, "The devil!" and Renaud gasped, "Gillette!"

Seraphica took advantage of the dual consternation to advance from her intrenchments. She quitted the shelter of the settee and advanced towards the Regent. "Monseigneur," she said, with a mocking reverence, "I am really very much ashamed of you."

By this time the Regent had recovered his composure, and again he assisted himself to snuff, after which he spoke gravely enough and not without dignity.

"You have me at a disadvantage. I think I am a little inclined to be ashamed of myself. But yonder phi-

SERAPHICA

landerer tried to pilfer my sweetheart, so I thought to give him tit for tat. I did not succeed, for you, mademoiselle, were adamant, yet I thought it no harm to fret him with a false thought. The trick has failed; with your good leaves I will retire as gracefully as may be from the field of my humiliation."

Then he bowed ceremoniously to Renaud, and with an air of greatest apology to Seraphica he quitted the room.

XXXI

RETROGRESSION

ON the threshold of the Windmill, Gillette found Adam Billaut sitting, as was his wont, in peaceful enjoyment of the air, his pipe, and his glass. He looked at Gillette with very little surprise disturbing his habitual, unexpressive countenance. Her absence had caused him slight perturbation, for his view of womankind in general was that it was flighty, erratic, not to be depended upon; and the easy machinery of the inn was set going smoothly enough by the assistance of a neighbor's wife. Adam showed neither wonder nor pleasure at his niece's return, and though he so far overcame his usual phlegmatic indifference to the world beyond his borders as to ask her, first, where she had been, and next, why she had changed her clothes, he was easily satisfied by the brief answers which Gillette condescended to give him on these points. An imaginary visit to an imaginary female friend in Paris, and an imaginary gift of garments by that imaginary female friend, completely calmed the curiosity of Master Adam, who was quite content to see Gillette resume her place in his household and give the neighbor's wife a sufficiently friendly dismissal.

But that valiant barrier guard, Porte-Panache, was not to be so lightly fobbed off or so facily pacified. It was

SERAPHICA

not easy to try and console him for the alarm he had felt at Gillette's disappearance by any conjured-up picture of an imaginary female friend in Paris. He had been seriously distressed when, on his evening visit to the Windmill, he had found the place apparently deserted, and when, after his loud summonses had aroused a reluctant host from his slumbers, he learned that Master Adam knew nothing whatever of the whereabouts of Gillette. As often as was consistent with his duties; he returned to the inn in the course of that night and the following morning, and his alarm grew greater when the growth of hours brought him no news of his mysteriously missing sweetheart.

Master Adam was useless, worse than useless, in throwing any light upon the disappearance. All he remembered of the events of the previous day was that he had ordered Gillette to prepare a meal for a gentleman in a red coat, and a little later to find a bottle of wine for a gentleman in a black coat and a gentleman in a white coat. After that he had retired for a little while into the garden for a doze. Waking again, after a short sleep, he had re-entered the inn, had paused in the empty main room to drink a glass of wine that remained in a bottle, and had then gone, properly and sensibly, up-stairs to bed.

Poor Porte-Panache was in a fever of agitation in consequence, and his alarms were not entirely lessened, while his curiosity was greatly increased by the return of Gillette, as mysteriously as she had departed, and dressed in a fashion very different from her usual wear, and wholly unsuited to her degree. At first Gillette tried to put him off by begging him to ask no questions, and assuring him,

SERAPHICA

if he did so, she would tell him no lies. But Porte-Panache was of a jealous disposition. The conversation about play-acting and the name of Master Hardi still rankled in his memory, and he was not so to be silenced or so to be satisfied. In the end Gillette, fearing to lose her lover altogether, and unwilling, also, that he should harbor wholly unjustifiable suspicions, consented, on the verge of tears, and after asking and receiving a solemn pledge of secrecy, to tell him the whole story.

It seemed, indeed, to the honest soldier a sufficiently remarkable story, this story of the young woman dressed as a man, of the change of clothes, of the fantastic abduction, the long journey in the coach, the second change of clothes, and the flight by night, with its commonplace contrast to the adventures which had led up to it. But Gillette was so positive in her assurances, so convincing in her earnestness, so tender in her caresses, that Porte-Panache could not choose but believe, and, moreover, as conclusive evidence, there, round the girl's neck, hanging by a piece of ribbon, was the wonderful diamond-ring which, according to her story, the girl cavalier had given to her as the price of her obedience. So he made no more bones about swallowing the story, and consented, on Gillette's request, to take charge of the ring and try to ascertain its value in some safe quarter. Gillette resumed a costume more fitted to her class, folded away the fine brocade of Seraphica in her bureau, and things at the Windmill inn resumed their wonted course for a while, with the familiar lack of custom, the familiar passing of travellers, the familiar drowsiness of Master Adam.

In a little world like that of the Windmill inn events soon fall back, even after the most surprising interrup-

SERAPHICA

tions, into their wonted way, and it did not need the passage of very many hours to put Gillette's adventure into what seemed a far-distant background. Indeed, she and Porte-Panache had almost ceased to speculate as to whether they should ever learn any more of the matter, when suddenly their interest in the incident was renewed by an unfamiliar visitor. This was a person of astute appearance and sober habit who seemed from his bearing, voice, and conduct to be what, as a matter of fact he was, the confidential clerk of a lawyer. This individual, with an air of what he believed to be great circumspection and perspicuity, taxed the hospitality of the Windmill inn, and asked Gillette over his wine a number of questions, the very first of which was sufficient to put her on her guard. She had promised to assist the dainty lady whose man's clothes she had worn, and whose ring was to be the basis of her fortunes and she was not going to afford unknown strangers any opportunity of interfering with the plans of that lady, whatever they might be. So the very discreet and tactful emissary gained no information of any kind from Gillette, whom he set down in his mental note-book as a more than ordinarily stupid girl, and when he had finished his wine he set off for Paris feeling confident that nothing was to be learned at the Windmill inn, and that he must pursue his inquiries in the capital.

After this visit, over which Porte-Panache and Gillette talked a great deal in the inn garden in the intervals of a rapidly increasing warmth of courtship—for marriage now on the basis of a well-negotiated diamond-ring seemed a very immediate matter—nothing further happened for a couple of days, and then something very momentous did

SERAPHICA

happen. A carriage drew up to the door of the Windmill a little after noon of a sunny day, and out of it came a portly gentleman in a white coat, who assisted a rather tottery gentleman in a black coat to descend from the vehicle. The pair entered the inn, where Gillette was busy laying a table. As she looked up on their entrance she recognized them at once, and one of them recognized her.

“By Heavens!” cried the gentleman in the white coat, giving a great slap to his thigh, “that is the girl I saw through the window.”

XXXII

A LOVER AND HIS LASS

WHEN Philip of Orleans left Seraphica and Renaud alone, the two stood facing each other for a while in an awkward silence, which Seraphica was the first to break. "Well; say something."

Renaud looked at her with something of a penitential air. "I did not doubt you for a moment," he stammered. He wished he had more to say, but could not find words for his wishes.

Seraphica nodded comprehendingly. "No friend ever doubts a friend. I suppose you are going back to Artois?"

Renaud shook his head. "I do not want to go back to Artois alone."

Seraphica began to laugh. "Has Madame de Phalaris been forgiven?" she asked, with a faint derision in her voice.

Renaud made an angry gesture of negation. "That error is dead, and few words knell and bury it. I have been a foolish prince; also, I have been a bad actor—the worst Harlequin in the world. But the harlequin has learned what the prince never knew—the worth of a woman."

Seraphica was still laughing as she questioned, "Oh,

SERAPHICA

highness, serene highness, Prince Harlequin, what is a woman worth?"

Renaud suddenly came nearer to her, suddenly spoke in a lower tone more earnestly. "A man's whole heart and soul and hope, if the woman be called by your name."

Seraphica still mocked him daintily. "Harlequin, Prince Harlequin, I believe you are making love to your Columbine."

Renaud protested passionately against her laughter. "I know what love means for the first time in my idle life. It is not Prince Harlequin who tells you he loves you; it is not Prince Renaud; it is the man who has been your comrade, your friend, the man who will be your lover to the end of his wealth of days."

When he had done speaking his face was very flushed, his eyes were very bright. He was plainly very much in earnest. Seraphica dropped comfortably onto the settee and looked at him quizzically.

"You are very complaisant, but your heart is quick tinder and your sentimentality kindles it. What do you really mean when you vow that you love me?"

Renaud, having found his tongue, was beginning to enjoy the use of it, and to remember that he was a lover of fine speech. "That I love you to the ultimate meaning of three exquisite words. They could not mean more on the lips of a king, on the lips of a poet, on the lips of a god."

Seraphica, nestling among the cushions, teased him. "Oh, princely hothead, if I were to take you at your word! Wait! You, Monseigneur Man, tell me, Madame Woman, that you love me, and it sounds very pleasant in the way you say it. But you are a prince and I am a

SERAPHICA

player, and it does not sound quite so pleasant when I remember that. For I will never be your mistress, sweet Prince."

Renaud was equal to the occasion in a splendid phrase. "Be my queen, sweet woman."

Seraphica was coldly practical. "A prince of St. Pol may not marry a player-woman though she were worthy to mate with an angel, which, indeed, I am not. It's no use making a wry face at sharp facts. We have been merry friends; perhaps we have both been dreaming a little with our eyes open and in the wide daylight. Let us banish our day-dreams; let us shake hands like friends and go our ways—you, the Prince, to you dukedom and the things that go with rulership; I, the strolling player, to the highways and byways, to the booths and tressels of my trade."

After she spoke there was silence for a space in the stately room, and Seraphica, keenly watching Renaud through demurely lowered lids, saw that his heart was like the stage of a playhouse where the good thought and the bad thought contended for supremacy. Presently Renaud lifted his head and answered her.

"You are right. It is not in the power of a prince of St. Pol to lift a humble lover to his side. It is not to be thought of; it is hardly worth while to regret it. So, with the lightest heart in the world, I blow my principality of St. Pol out of the window."

As he spoke he made a gesture as of one who, holding a feather between his fingers, throws it from him into the air and puffs it away.

Seraphica burst into a fit of laughter, less because she was amused than because she wished to veil her pleasure.

SERAPHICA

"Harlequin, Prince Harlequin, are you taking leave of your senses?"

But Renaud had taken his decision now and was not to be denied. Candor was in his eyes, determination in his voice as he wooed her gallantly.

"My dukedom is where I can touch your hand, look into your eyes, listen to your voice. To the devil with St. Pol. There's a great world overseas. That's it, a new life in the New World. Come down with me to the sea, my wife."

Seraphica got up from her nest of cushions and came quite close to him, laying a firm hand upon his shoulder, and looking firmly into his imploring eyes.

"So you really want to marry me, Renaud, me, the Columbine of a cry of players? Lord, how the world will laugh at you! Will the time come, I wonder, when the love will prove weaker than the laughter?"

Instantly Renaud flung himself on his knee at her feet, and caught at her free hand and kissed it.

"Never," he protested, and the sound of his voice was very sweet in its strength of feeling to the woman's ears, and the look on his face was very uplifting in its assurance to the woman's eyes.

Seraphica sighed a little as she looked down upon him.

"I like to hear you say that," she said. "I like to see you kneeling at my feet. I once thought that if ever this thing happened I should die of laughing—"

Renaud scrambled to his feet, a little dashed and embarrassed, unable to take her meaning.

"Of laughing?" he said, and his face and his voice showed that he was puzzled as he spoke,

Seraphica went on.

SERAPHICA

"But now, on my honor, I feel more ready to cry than to laugh. Oh, Harlequin-Renaud, Renaud-Harlequin, I never thought that I should learn to love you, though there was a time when I hoped that you might learn to love me. But I have learned the lesson, and I do love you, so strangely and strongly and dearly, that perhaps I might best show my love by running apart from you, over the hills and far away."

Seraphica was looking earnestly at him as she spoke, and her look was at once whimsical and wistful. Renaud's immediate answer was to clasp her in his arms.

"My darling," he cried, in a passion of rapture, and held her fast to his heart, and as he did so Seraphica felt a sudden thrill of joy to think that, strong as she was, Renaud was so much stronger than she. At that moment she might never have aped mannish airs nor sworn soldier's oaths nor sung droll songs, might never have swaggered with a sword, might never have ridden, a breeched and booted cavalier at arms, in pursuit of a truant. All the amazon in her seemed to be melting away, guttering like the wax of a candle in a draught of strong air; for some delicious instants she was just one lass like another, clasped and happy in her sweetheart's arms. For she was happy; he was her sweetheart and she was his; and in her joy that she had won him for her lover, and that he had shown himself so gallant and so honest and so true, she forgot for a moment to rejoice at her triumph over a runaway. But it was not yet full kissing-time with her, and she held him off when his lips sought hers again after the first embrace. "Wait," she commanded; "wait," she pleaded, "this lovering is strange to me"—as indeed it was. "The old wine of the gods

SERAPHICA

is strong and heady. I must sip it a little at a time till my wits are tuned to its vigor." So she spoke, wondering at the wonder of it all, and Renaud, instantly gentle, yielded the pressure of his arms and restrained his caresses. He was a happy lover and she a happy lass.

XXXIII

GODS OUT OF A MACHINE

IT had been Seraphica's intention to prolong her delicious mystification, if not indefinitely, at least for a considerable period, and to taste the pleasures of a theatrical, pastoral wooing, with an enamoured prince for hero and a high-spirited Columbine for heroine, but the fates that guide the fortunes of princes and harlequins, of duchesses and columbines, the fates that had been so far propitious to her every wish and complaisant accomplices in her delectable conspiracy, now seemed decided to show that even Seraphica could not have everything quite in her own way. Even while she was rubbing her pink palms together, and congratulating herself upon the magnificent success of her enterprise, even while she was revolving in her dainty head further schemes for the testing of Prince Renaud's fidelity and the tantalizing of his desires, destiny, big with disclosure, was drawing nearer and nearer to the Regent's court.

As soon as Seraphica and Renaud had come to their half-understanding, for it could only be called a half-understanding between lover and lass, when the lover believed his lass to be an adored play-actress, and the lass was in reality a one-time detested duchess of Bapaume, Seraphica decided that it was their duty upon

SERAPHICA

the instant to make known the condition of affairs to Master Hardi's company of players. This was the easier because at that moment Master Hardi's company was assembled on the green space in front of the little theatre, where Watteau was busy making sketches of its individual members for a large canvas of the Masks. Seraphica's presence was needed for this canvas. Seraphica had promised to attend the open-air session, and Renaud himself, although no longer one of the body comic, ought, she resolved, to be included in the tableau.

Accordingly, the pair of lovers wended their way from the great golden room and through splendid corridors into the open air and the smiling park, and so through pleasant alleys and winding paths to the place where Master Hardi swayed his mimic kingdom. The feelings of both were not a little confused and exalted, and so it came to pass that while both talked much and laughed much on their pilgrimage to the theatre, the thoughts of both were busier than their speech or their smiles. Prince Renaud was full of a wild joy at having won a beautiful woman with whom he was in love, as he easily convinced himself, for the first time in his life. Madame de Phalaris was no more than a fat shadow, not to be remembered without displeasure, and to be forgotten as speedily as possible. Renaud had no doubts as to his own happiness in the present, and no regrets for his follies in the past. Whatever alloy of agitation there might be in the gold of the moment came from the chemistry of the future. He had gained an exquisite sweetheart; he was to win an adorable wife, a delightful companion.

So much was pure joy, but troublesome thoughts would intrude of St. Pol over there in Artois, and old Duke

SERAPHICA

Aymon, and the solemn French-Flemish gentlefolk who were so particular about descent and so wise in coat armor. Was there the slightest chance, he wondered, that the old Duke would welcome a play-actress into his stately halls, or that the nobility of Artois would accept a Columbine as the equal of their mothers, their wives, and their daughters?

Renaud knew in his heart that there was little chance of such a miracle. The old Duke might relent because he loved his son, and must needs, so Renaud felt sure, love his daughter-in-law, but Artois, he was certain, would never shift its ground. These reflections, however, did not make him regret in the least the step he was taking. He would do as he had said he would do to Seraphica. He would take her over the great seas to the New World and a new life. As he looked at her smiling at his side he felt sure that not merely a principality of St. Pol but a kingdom or an empire would be a sacrifice offered to gain a maid so gracious.

As for Seraphica, her brain was bubbling with quite different thoughts that all made for amazement. She had won her game, after all, only to lose it. She had brought Prince Renaud to her feet only to find that she was ready to lift him to her lips and hold him to her heart. This was not the triumph she had looked for. It was a triumph for the love-god rather than a triumph for the proud Duchess. And yet she was strangely content that the god should triumph, and she was holding Renaud's hand as a happy child might hold the hand of a child, and babbling merry nonsense as they came in view of the open space and the azure-curtained theatre.

It was a pleasant sight that presented itself to the

SERAPHICA

lovers. Master Hardi's players, clad in the fantastic costumes of the Comedy of Masks, were scattered about the lawn, and Watteau, seated, was busily engaged in sketching one of the women, while Master Hardi, on the stage of the theatre, was making his preparations for a new production. As soon as the players caught sight of the new-comers they gave them a shout of welcome, and Watteau, disturbed in his work by the noise, looked up and learned its cause, and, closing his note-book, rose and advanced to greet Seraphica and Renaud. They found themselves in a moment the centre of a little group of folk, and Seraphica, as she told her marvellous tale of her betrothal and of Renaud's identity, amused herself by reading on the faces of her fellow-players the different emotions which so candidly betrayed themselves. The men were all anxiety at once to assert their friendship with a prince of St. Pol, and to deprecate, somewhat over-earnestly, any possible resentment on his part of familiarities shown by them to one whom they had believed to be no better than themselves. On the women's faces she read regrets that their charms had not entangled Renaud, and enabled them to make a substantial claim upon his generosity. As to herself, she knew that the feeling of the men was envy of the Prince who had won the flower they would have been glad to gather, and that the women were jealous of their fellow who, undeserving, had gained so splendid a prize.

All these obvious emotions only amused Seraphica, but the expression of one face in the group that crowded about them distressed her not a little. It was the expression on the face of Watteau, an expression in which an infinity of well-wishing seemed blended with an in-

SERAPHICA

finity of wistful regret. While the others buzzed around Renaud, determined to make the most of their intimacy with an illustrious person, Watteau caught Seraphica by the hands and drew her a little apart from the rest of the group.

"Well," he said, "I hope you are going to be happy, and indeed I think you are going to be happy, for you are one of those that rather create happiness than seek it, and have in yourself the sunlight and the color for which others hunger."

Seraphica laughed and blushed. "You have always been very good to me," she said, "and though our friendship has only existed for a few hours, I trust it will continue until the end of our lives."

The painter sighed a little, and then smiled as if in protest at any sound so melancholy as a sigh in the presence of Seraphica. "Our friendship will last all my life," he said, "and yet it will not last very long. I wish the gods had given you to me, for the gods have used me strangely, teaching me all my life to long for just such a woman as you, and then, when you came, choosing to deny me."

Seraphica scarcely knew what to say. The words of Watteau, the looks of Watteau, always moved her deeply, stirring in her feelings which she had never felt before and would never feel again, and yet she knew that she could not have done otherwise than she had done. She was silent while Watteau's eyes were fixed upon her face, and then he spoke afresh.

"Tell me," he said, softly, "did you know all the while that this player, this Harlequin, was Renaud of St. Pol?"

Seraphica's face flamed hotly. She knew he must mis-

SERAPHICA

understand her answer, and she knew also that she must speak the truth. "Yes," she said, "I knew it all the time."

A grayness came over the face of the painter. Then he said: "I might have known my poor cause was hopeless enough. We children of the wilderness cannot compete with the lords in the high places." And as he spoke he relinquished her hands and made as if to leave her, but Seraphica would not have it so, and she caught his hands again.

"No, no, no," she protested, "it is not because of his name that I care for him. Some day you will know that this is true, but now I just want you to believe it because I tell you so."

"You really love him?" Watteau asked, thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Seraphica, "I really love him, should really love him if he were only the very bad player he has proved himself to be."

Watteau glanced towards Renaud with a little smile at once quizzical and pathetic. "I suppose it would be rude," he said, "to ask you why you love him, and I suppose that if I committed that rudeness you would scarcely answer me."

"It would not be rude at all," Seraphica answered. "We are too good friends not to be able to say what we please to each other. I cannot very clearly tell you why I love him. I suppose no woman ever can clearly tell why she loves any man, or any man quite clearly tell why he loves any woman. He is young, he is comely, he is gallant; also, he is foolish, hot-headed, an indifferent poet, and by no means a perfect swordsman. He will never make any great figure in the world, I feel sure of

SERAPHICA

that, but he is honest, he is honorable, and somehow he has lodged himself in my heart. That is all I can tell you."

"And that is enough," said the painter. "A thousand commentaries on the book of love come, in the end, to some such simple conclusion. I hope you will be very happy. I shall always remember Columbine."

Seraphica was about to assure him that Columbine would always remember her painter, when her attention and that of Watteau were distracted from themselves by a sudden agitation that was evident among the players who surrounded Prince Renaud. The cause of this agitation was instantly apparent. The Regent was coming across the lawn in the direction of the theatre, and behind him came the little King, walking rapidly between two gentlemen, to each of whom he gave a hand, and each of whom was compelled to hurry somewhat undignifiedly to keep pace with Louis' speed. Seraphica's face fell for a moment, though her eyes widened with irrepressible amusement as she saw that one of the gentlemen thus accompanying the King was a portly personage whose florid countenance contrasted strongly with his white coat, and that the other was a lean individual habited in academic black.

XXXIV

SOME REVELATIONS

EVERY one of those that were standing on the lawn looked with different degrees of curiosity and interest at the new-comers, but Antoine, eying the situation in somewhat dejected and clear isolation, saw that knowledge seemed to be revealed on only two faces—the face of Renaud of St. Pol and the face of his Columbine. Renaud, of course, knew well enough by sight as well as by slight personal acquaintance the two men whom the little King was holding by the hand, and, knowing them, he could only guess that their unexpected appearance thus at the Regent's court had some connection with his flight, and might be the cause of some embarrassment to his present purposes. The look, therefore, of knowledge which Antoine read on his face was strongly shadowed by annoyance, whereas the expression on the face of Columbine, if slightly tinged with vexation, was chiefly marked by an amusement which threatened to assert itself in an explosion of laughter.

The painter's condition of puzzled speculation was not destined to remain long unenlightened. Even as he had arrived at these conclusions concerning the two persons who most interested him in the group gathered before the theatre, the two persons were together. For

SERAPHICA

Seraphica had quitted his side in an instant, and with a pretty imperiousness had plucked honest Renaud from the centre of the group of gaping players and drawn him a little ways apart.

What she had to say, what she had to do, must be said, must be done quickly.

"Lover of mine," she cried, "I fear that if you knew all you would call me a horrid girl!"

Renaud, swimming in delicious imaginings, was startled. He looked at her dubiously, and many fears pinched his heart. Could it be that she had confessions to make to him which he would rather not hear—which he would not hear, believe, or remember? He thought of the lives of strolling players, and he choked as he thought. But Seraphica did not give him much time either for choking or for thinking. With a skip and a bound she had danced from him to Spavento, had plucked the hat from the player's head, the cloak from the player's shoulders, the sword from the player's side. And as she did so she saw how across the lawn the Regent was coming nearer, and nearer too the King with his two companions. In a twinkling she had whisked the hat upon her dainty head and muffled the cloak about her. Then she advanced towards Renaud, and as he turned addressed him menacingly. "Sir, I have a bone to pick with you. I call upon you to assert that Madame de Phalaris still bears the dearest name in the world to you."

Renaud stared, puzzled by the masquerade. "Did you spy upon my fight in the inn?"

Seraphica smiled, and her mind was full of memories. "I saw it, but I did not spy upon it. If we had a pair

SERAPHICA

of swords here I would show you how to disarm an angry antagonist."

A sudden revulsion came to Renaud. He was back again in fancy in the Windmill Inn, fuming at the insolence of the jackanapes who had presumed to be playful at the expense of Madame de Phalaris and her foolish lover. "Were you the lad in gray?" he cried.

Seraphica flung aside the hat and cloak and sword for Spavento to collect, and dipped him a courtesy. "At your service."

Renaud stared at her. His head was spinning, his heart was beating furiously. He did not know what to think or what to say. "In Heaven's name, who are you?"

Without waiting to answer him, Seraphica, with a frolic laugh, danced from his side and ran a few yards to greet the new-comers, who already were hard upon the group of players. In another instant the Regent had drawn near to Seraphica and made her a low bow.

"Here," he said, "are some friends of yours who desire to wait upon you. It seems we have been entertaining an angel unawares."

With these words he drew aside, and suffered the King, who was close upon his heels, to hurry forward, still pulling imperiously at the hands of a somewhat winded gentleman in black and a somewhat embarrassed gentleman in white.

De Secherat, releasing himself abruptly from the pressure of royal fingers, dropped on one knee before Seraphica, and caught her hand and kissed it.

"Thank Heaven, your Highness," he cried — "thank Heaven, we have found you at last!"

SERAPHICA

"Yes, thank Heaven," muttered the Vidame, as he made her a low reverence and muttered beneath his breath, "You baggage!"

Renaud, who, when he saw the pair advancing, assumed, of course, that their advance was intended for him, was indeed astonished to behold them direct their course towards Seraphica, and to hear de Secherat address her in this fashion. In a moment he was by her side, facing the astonished lawyer, who up to this moment, occupied as he was solely by his interest in Seraphica, had neither seen nor recognized the young Prince of St. Pol.

"Highness!" Renaud cried. "What do you mean?"

Seraphica turned to Renaud and dipped him a courtesy, while her eyes danced and her cheeks dimpled with laughter.

"It means," she said, "that your Columbine is, after all, only a 'merry devil in petticoats.'" She turned with a sly glance to the Vidame. "Your phrase, I think, Vidame," she said.

The Vidame coughed apologetically. "Too familiar," he protested; but added, beneath his breath, "Yet apt, all the same."

While Renaud stared, unable to realize what was being told him, unable to speak from amazement, Seraphica continued, "So if your heart still warms to me you must learn to call me Seraphica."

"Seraphical!" Renaud repeated, bewildered.

De Secherat stared at him.

"Is it possible, Monseigneur," he said, "that your Highness does not know that this lady is her Highness Seraphica Valeria, Duchess of Bapaume?"

SERAPHICA

Seraphica held out her hands to Renaud in dainty appeal.

"Am I such a virago?" she asked. "Am I so unpalatably mannish? Will you run away from me still if I want you to marry me?"

Renaud's wits were all in a whirl. He was beginning to realize incoherently how egregiously he had been misled, how entirely he had been the sport and plaything of the little Duchess's impudent intrigue, and how, after all, instead of compromising his family and offending his caste by marrying a dancing-girl, he was only going to do with a light heart that which he had fled from St. Pol with a heavy heart not to do — he was going to marry the Duchess Seraphica. He had been tricked, he had been bamboozled, he had even, he feared, been made not a little ridiculous; but what did it all matter when he had won the heart of the most adorable woman in the world? Heedless of his surroundings, he dropped on one knee, and, seizing Seraphica's hand, kissed it passionately. "I love you!" he protested.

The Regent, his florid face illuminated by an ironic smile, addressed his gaping audience. "Gentlemen," he said, "I have had the honor to inform his Majesty that a matrimonial alliance has been arranged between their Highnesses the Duchess Seraphica Valeria of Bapaume and Prince Renaud of St. Pol."

The players, regardless of etiquette, broke out into hearty applause. For the second time in so short a space they had learned wonders about one of their company. Indeed, they now began to eye each other almost suspiciously, as if they were expecting further revelations to be made, and that Spavento or Celimène might prove

SERAPHICA

to be of princely parentage. But there were no further revelations.

The little King advanced to Seraphica, and there were tears in his eyes as he gave her his hand to kiss.

"The crown of France would not be too fair for that forehead," he said, prettily enough; and then he added, half wistfully, half jestingly, "Can we not persuade you to change your mind?"

Seraphica made him a grave reverence. "Sire," she said, "I love my runaway, and we must make a match of it. We must go to Artois to play at Prince and Princess there as we played at Harlequin and Columbine at Paris."

XXXV

EPILOGUE

PHILIP of Orleans was much entertained by the romantic masquerade that had been played without his knowledge in his court, and he insisted on receiving from Monsieur de Secherat an account of how he had succeeded in discovering the whereabouts of his fugitive Duchess. This Monsieur de Secherat was very willing to do, and he narrated at some considerable length the adventure of the cloaked woman whom he had believed to be the Duchess, this woman's escape, his own illness and the delay it caused, and his final identification of the sham Duchess with the maid of the Windmill inn.

Gillette, it seemed, after much entreaty and persuasion, which succeeded where menace proved ineffectual, consented to consult with Porte-Panache, and the result of their consultation was that she agreed to tell all she knew, which, after all, was little enough, and amounted only to the fact that she had changed clothes with the audacious Duchess of Bapaume. Incidentally, however, Gillette happened to mention that on the day of the metamorphosis she had been eagerly looking forward to a visit from Monsieur Théophile Hardi, the theatrical manager whom the Regent was pleased to patronize.

This suggested to the despairing de Secherat at least

SERAPHICA

a possible clew, and he followed it out to a successful issue, for it led him first to the inn of the Plucked Peacock, where he soon ascertained that a girl answering in all points to his description of the Duchess Seraphica was staying, and from the Plucked Peacock it carried him direct to Versailles and to an interview with the Regent, an interview which was adjourned to the green lawn before Master Hardi's theatre, and which ended in the discovery of Seraphica.

Before this narrative had been begun the players, under the leadership of Master Hardi, had taken respectfully affectionate farewells of their two exalted comrades and retired into their theatre. While the narrative was going on, with Louis and Renaud for diverted listeners and the Vidame for occasional witness, the painter touched Seraphica upon the arm and drew her a little apart.

"So this," he said, "is how you knew the real name of your Harlequin?"

Seraphica nodded. She found it hard to speak, for quite unaccountably her high spirits seemed for a moment to be overstrained, and her mirth threatened to shift to tears.

"I was wrong," said Antoine, quietly, "to be doubtful even for a moment. I should have known that no self-seeking spirit could ever shelter behind those candid eyes. But you have brought me another disappointment, Columbine. You are as unreal, you see—for me I mean—as far away, as unattainable, as the pretty people I love to paint. I live in a kingdom of dreams, and you came for a moment and led me out of that enchanted land, and I thought that the world might be for a while as delightful as my visions. Well, you came and you conquered, and now you go to your great house and your great happi-

SERAPHICA

ness, for which none will pray more passionately than I, and I shall return to my colors, my puppets, and my dream of a dream."

He bent down and kissed her hand very gently. "Columbine is dead," he said. "Long live the Duchess of Bapaume!" He suddenly corrected himself, and tried to smile. "I forgot," he added, "the most fortunate man in the world. I should say, long live the Princess of St. Pol!"

He was smiling very pleasantly as he spoke, and only tenderness and a gracious regret seemed to shine in his large eyes. But Seraphica knew that the heart in his frail body was racked with an agony which could find no peace in words, which would find no peace in images, to which she had no power to minister peace. She wanted to say many things, but could find nothing worth the saying. At last she spoke.

"You will finish my portrait, will you not?" she entreated.

And Antoine answered her, brightly, "Oh yes, I will finish your portrait."

And he did finish the portrait, besides painting that other picture of Seraphica, in her bridal dress, which hangs upon the walls of the Louvre. Those who look at it may conjure up as they gaze some confused picture of the age in which she lived, and of the strange court in which she played her memorable prank, with its florid Regent, its little King, its possession of shameless favorites and graceless gentlemen, and wonder to think of Antoine Watteau's Duchess moving so fearlessly through such a company of Comus. Surely, few will be found to look at the picture who will agree that it represents a "merry devil in petticoats."

THE END

OCT 28 1919